Nikolai Nosov

ELEVEN STORIES FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

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Translated from the Russian

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*Nikolai Nosov**

Lovers of children's writing in many countries know the works of Tolstoy and Chekhov, Turgenev and Gorky, Korolenko and Kuprin. For the most part, these renowned Russian authors were writing at a time, prior to the 1917 October Revolution, when no special children's literature existed. It emerged only after 1917 with a whole galaxy of famous names: Gorky, Bianki, Krupskaya, Gaidar, Kassil, Chukovsky, Marshak, Mikhalkov, Barto, Nosov and many others.

Nikolai Nosov is justly regarded by Soviet children as the king of fun and humour. The main characters of his short stories and novels are just and truthful, sharp-witted and simple-hearted, incurable dreamers, some of them indolent, some energetic. Nosov's books have long been favourites with children and more than one generation has been helped by its lively and gentle humour to understand the need for plain human decency in all its aspects.

Nosov was born into an actor's family in the Ukrainian city of Kiev in 1908. The family was poor; the father could not give his children a proper education on his earnings as an actor. So young Nikolai had to leave school at fourteen and find a job. His self-education, however, helped him to pass the entrance examinations for the Kiev Institute of the Arts when he was nineteen. But two years later he developed a passion for cinema, a new art form at the time, and transferred to the State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow.

There he led a typical student's existence: living on his grant, residing in a student hostel, taking his meals in the student refectory, racing to lectures and arguing furiously on all the passing fancies of student debate.

The cinema attracted Nosov with its atmosphere of creativity, the eternal seeking for new forms, the grandiose scale of its plans and operations. The cinema took up twenty years of his life. An imaginative and innovative film director, he produced a number of cartoons, investing

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his films with clever and uncommon treatment of their themes, seeking always to present a thoughtful yet entertaining film. He manifested this talent particularly well in scientific and educational films.

During World War II, Nosov put all his experience and ability into war documentaries for which he received the high acclaim of experts and was awarded the Red Star Order in 1943.

So involved was Nosov in the cinema that at first he gave no thought to a literary career. But it sometimes happens in life that a person takes up one kind of work and then suddenly finds that his main calling lies elsewhere, that he has enormous resources of untapped talent deep down.

And so it was with Nosov. At first he made up little stories, fairy tales, fables for his little son. Then he had an urge to commit them to paper. And as a man of mature years, yet quite a young writer, he went with some trepidation to submit his story *The Jokers* to the children's magazine *Murzilka*. It was accepted. That happened in 1938 when Nosov was just 30. But he had a long way to go before he became a real literary professional.

His style was not accepted by all at once. Many editors fought shy of Nosov's unusual storytelling technique that spurned the usual devices. But children took to them straightaway. Children's periodicals were bombarded with letters of thanks to the writer and requests to publish more of his stories. Such persistence paid off. Works by Nosov began to appear more and more frequently in a variety of publications. All the same, it was not until after the war that Nosov's talent as a writer blossomed fully.

In 1945, the first slim collection of Nosov's stories *Tock-Tock-Tock* came out. It was quickly followed by several other books. At roughly the same time his first long story was published: *Vitya Maleyev at Home and at School;* it was to become a great favourite, earning its author countrywide fame and the USSR State Prize.

The pinnacle of Nosov's attainment as a writer are surely his books about the little boy "Dunno", constituting the trilogy *The Adventures of Dunno and His Friends*, *Dunno in Sunshine City* and *Dunno on the Moon*. This ambitious work based on a single character has become a classic for children up to teenage level. It has been made into radio production, cartoon films and plays. And it has brought its author the N. K. Krupskaya State Prize of the Russian Federation.

The range of Nosov's literary activity is vast. It encompasses his short and longer stories for children of pre-school and junior school range, film scripts, and humorous tales for senior schoolchildren in the form of literary essays. These essays comprise an entire world of Nosov's personal thoughts, reminiscences and considerations on life. In his favourite manner, in the form of humorous stories, Nosov writes about vital and serious problems, pokes fun at faults of character—for laughter hits its target more surely and sooner than any other barb. At the same time, Nosov is never harsh; he is amusing and fundamentally kind. Kind but not sugar sweet. In this respect it is pertinent to recall the words of children's

writer, Boris Zhitkov, who characterises very precisely the attitude of children to those who patronise or spoil them: "Children, wise creatures that they are, repulse that sort of thing mainly with their feet. 'Ah, what a cute little thing,' says a grown-up. 'A real doll.' And hugs the child to a hot breast. But the 'doll' fights 'auntie' off with feet and hands, turns away from the impassioned embrace. The child does not want to be a doll and finds this sickly-sweet, lipsmacking ecstasy of adults simply repugnant. Of course, there are children who quickly adapt to this smothering, size up the situation and see what the grown-ups expect; so they start to react accordingly and bathe in the glow of adult joy."

Nosov is passionately against any form of patronage: his is a deep respect, a conversation of equals. This he sees as the pathway to a child's heart.

Children's world is intricate, multifarious, frequently incomprehensible to grown-ups. Not everyone who begins to write for the younger generation finds the key to open the door into the world of children. Yet Nosov immediately made firm contact with children, gaining their sympathy and captivating children's imagination with his inexhaustible fantasy, his great sense of fun, sincerity and kindness.

His style of storytelling, at once pitching the reader into the thick of the action, certainly assists him in reaching the hearts and minds of his young readers. From the opening lines, the reader enters into the life of the characters and takes an active part in their adventures. How could a child not envy the two boys Kolya and Misha in *Mishka's Porridge* when they are left on their own in the country for two whole days and nights. What exciting adventures in prospect! On Day 1, the boys drop their pot into the well, their porridge gets burned and their fish burns to a frazzle. So they are left with nothing to eat or drink. That sets them thinking: they come to understand that it is not enough merely to be absolutely certain that they can do anything. They have to possess an ability to do what seems to be easy things at first glance. It is typical of Nosov to make his characters think, placing them in a situation of everyday difficulties. So let them make mistakes, they have to learn to think for themselves and come up with the right solution.

This seek-and-learn situation is inherent in all of Nosov's short stories. The young boy or girl begins to experiment to get to the bottom of things. To be sure, the result of this insatiable curiosity, as it happens in *The Telephone*, may be a broken and useless apparatus. But a child cannot resist the temptation to look inside the casing to discover where the electric current comes from.

The two boys Kostya and Shurik in the story *Putty* had to prise out the putty from a window frame so as to model animals from it. True, Kostya's snake turned out more like a liver sausage, but that did not matter; he could still try his hand at something else. The putty story ends in a real hullabaloo in a cinema when the boys search for their putty under the

seats; but that does not daunt them. They are ever ready to think something up, make it, try it out...

The inventiveness of Nosov's heroes is unlimited. The two friends in *Story-Tellers* invent a whole stream of crazy schemes: he would eat a whole tub of ice-cream in one go, Mishutka insists. And if he were swallowed by a crocodile, he would come out alive and well, boasts Stasik, trying to go one better then his friend. And then suddenly into this harmless world of fantasy comes a real lie. Igor has overheard some of their talk: he laughs at them and declares that he is the best liar. He had eaten a pot of jam and put the blame on his sister. Yet Mishutka and Stasik do not find that sort of fibbing at all fair.

"'Your sister was punished because of you, and you had a good time!' Mishutka said. '...A *real* liar!.. Go away! We don't even want to sit next to you.'"

We see how in this little story the author moves imperceptibly from the humorous to the serious and important. Such a grain of education is planted in virtually all Nosov's stories. Without tiresome moralising or sharp words, he makes a character in *The Inkblot* understand that it is both silly and harmful to amuse classmates by smearing one's face with India ink.

"The schoolmistress came in and noticed the boy's prank. She peered at him intently over her glasses, examining the smears, and then shook her head. 'You should never have done that,' she said in a worried voice.

"'Why not?'

"'Because India ink is a chemical, and it's poisonous. It irritates the skin. It will give you a mild rash that will itch, and then it might turn into blisters and spread all over your face in running sores.'

"Fedya was frightened. 'I won't put any more ink on my face,' he whispered." Of course he will not, but nor will most children reading the story ever think of painting themselves so stupidly with whatever comes to hand.

Nosov is firmly convinced that a child should, from an early age, learn to be responsible for his actions. He talks about this gently and sensibly without intruding upon the play principle in a child's perception of his surroundings; he takes into consideration the child's instinct for what is fair, his desire to be praised for doing good.

In the story *And I'm Helping Too*, five-year-old Ninochka is keen to help schoolchildren collect scrap metal. The writer describes this keenness in plain children's language, yet with great respect: "Well, Grannie," says the little girl earnestly in response to Grannie's ticking off for not coming home earlier, "you said it yourself that children should help grown-ups. Daddie helped too when he was a boy. So I want to help as well."

And if you get into mischief, have the courage to own up. Don't try to hide under the settee like Sasha in the story of the same name. After all,

the policeman found out that it was Sasha who scared the wits out of an old lady by firing his toy pistol behind her on the street. So lying to everyone and getting his sisters to tell lies too got him nowhere. He only had to take the full force of his shame later on when it all came out. The same happened to Vitalik in the story *The Crucian Carp* when he had to admit that he had tried to put the blame on the cat for the fish's disappearance from its aquarium. It took him a long time to own up, but he did so when Mother was about to punish the poor innocent cat.

And if you have ever climbed over a fence and torn your trousers, then you will know Bobka's plight in *The Patch* when he ripped his best soldier-like trousers, an object of envy amongst the lads. It was no use sniffling and begging Mother to darn them. Just try to mend them yourself. Which is exactly what Bobka did. Fair enough. "It took him ages to do the job, he moaned and groaned, yet when it was over it was a real treat to look at. It was sewn on perfectly, smoothly and so firmly that one wouldn't tear it off with one's teeth." When Bobka went out to play, his friends clustered round. "That's super," they said. "Just look at that, the patch is traced in pencil; anyone can see you've sewn it on yourself. You're a marvel."

Kindness and warm responsiveness are innate in children. But like any other character trait they have to be developed. Nosov's books are able assistants because they provide lessons in warm relationships with a friend or any boy or girl at all. The desire to help, to extend a helping hand to someone in distress or simply to share a burden is a virtue possessed by many Nosov characters. He resolves such problems with childlike simplicity, devoid of sweet words or ecstasies, as do Mishutka and Stasik in *Story-Tellers*. They just cannot be indifferent to the tears of little Tanya whose elder brother lied about the jam.

"'What were you crying about?' Mishutka asked.

"'Mummie wouldn't let me go outside to play.'

"'Why not?'

"'Cause of the jam. But I didn't eat it. Igor said I did. He must have eaten it, and then he said I did.'

"'Sure he ate it. He even boasted about it. Don't cry. Come on up to my house and I'll give you my half of ice-cream,' Mishutka said.

"'And I'll give you my half. I'll just have a lick and then I'll give it to you,' Stasik promised."

Together with the short stories, this book includes a slightly longer tale *Jolly Family* in which two friends Kolya and Misha think of hatching out chicks in their domestic incubator. Here the author leads us into a more complex experiment. From the start the boys do not even suspect what they have let themselves in for; but once they get started they refuse to give up even though their nocturnal watch over the incubator wears them out. It is just as well that their classmates come to their aid. All sorts of adventures crop up, especially when the chicks do not hatch out on the

appointed day. The lads, however, are patient and manage to hatch out the chicks in the end.

There is much more to say about Nikolai Nosov and his work. Neither this introduction nor the book itself sets out to present all the writer's best stories. The book includes just ten humorous stories and a longer one for younger children. Some may already be familiar to readers abroad, such as *Mishka's Porridge*, *The Telephone*, *Jolly Family*, *Story-Tellers*, *The Crucian Carp* and *Visiting Grandpa*.

Each story is interesting in itself, but all of them together express the author's aspiration "to show what a pure, wonderful being a child is, how receptive he is to goodness, what marvellous, intelligent, warm and poetical feeling he has in him and how much he needs attention, understanding and affection".

I. Boronetsky

Visiting Grandpa

Shurik and I spent last summer visiting Grandpa. Shurik is my kid brother. I was seven and already at school, but he wasn't.

Still, he never obeys me. Well, I don't care. The day we arrived we explored the yard, the sheds and the attic. I found an

empty jam jar and an empty box of shoe polish. Shurik found an old door pull and a big galosh. Then we nearly had a fight over a fishing-rod in the attic. I saw it first and shouted, "That's mine!"

Then Shurik saw it and he shouted,

"It's mine!"

I grabbed one end, he grabbed the other and we pulled. I got so mad I yanked it hard and he tumbled over backwards. Then he said,

"Who needs your old rod? I have my galosh."

"You can kiss your lovely galosh, but don't you dare touch my rod again."

I found a spade in the shed and went off to dig worms, for I had decided to go fishing. Shurik went to ask Grandma for some matches.

"What do you want them for?" she demanded.

"I want to make a fire in the yard. Then I'll put the galosh on top of the fire and when it melts it'll be rubber."

"What will you think of next! Why, you'll burn the house down if I don't keep an eye on you. No, my dear, don't even ask me for them. Children should never play with matches. Imagine such mischief!"

So Shurik tied one end of a piece of string to the door pull and the other to his galosh. He marched up and down the yard, dragging the galosh along.

When he came over to me and saw me digging for worms he said,

"You're wasting your time. You won't catch anything anyway."

"Why not?"

"I'll put a spell on the fish."

"Don't scare me," I said.

I dug some worms, put them in a box and went off to the pond.

The pond was behind the house, where the collective farm's gardens began. I put a worm on my hook, cast my line and sat down to wait for a bite. Shurik crept up and began yelling at the top of his voice:

Be he alive, or be he dead,
I'll grind his bones to make
my bread!

I decided not to say anything, because I knew that if I did, it would only make him shout louder. He finally got tired of shouting his evil spell, tossed his galosh into the water, and sailed it around on the surface by the string. Then he thought up something else: he threw the galosh into the pond, chucked stones at it until it sank, then pulled it up again.

For a moment or two I didn't say a word. Then I hollered,

"Get out of here! You've scared all my fish away!"

"You won't catch anything anyway. I put a spell on them," he yelled.

And he tossed his galosh into the middle of the pond!

I jumped up and grabbed a stick. Shurik ran off, with the galosh dancing along crazily behind him. He was lucky I didn't catch him.

I went back to the pond and sat down to fish again.

The sun was high overhead by then and I still hadn't had a single bite. What was wrong with those fish? I was so mad at Shurik I could have beat his brains out. I didn't believe in his spell, but I knew that if I came home empty-handed he'd laugh at me. I tried everything: casting far into the pond and close to

the bank, sinking my hook deeper into the water, but nothing helped. I began to feel hungry and went home.

There was a great hammering at our gate.

When I got closer I saw it was Shurik. He had got hold of a hammer and some nails and was hammering the door pull to the gate.

"Why are you nailing this here?"

He grinned when he saw me.

"Ah, the fisherman's back! Where's your catch?" he asked and giggled.

"Why are you nailing this to the gate? There is a handle here."

"So what? Now there'll be two. In case one comes off."

When he was all through hammering he had one nail left. He couldn't decide what to do with it. At first, he just wanted to drive it into the gate. Then he got a better idea. He held his galosh to the gate with the sole against the wood and nailed it there.

"What's that for?"

"Nothing special."

"That's stupid."

Then we saw Grandpa coming home for lunch. Shurik was scared. He tried to pull the galosh off the gate, but it was nailed fast. Then he stood in front of it, to hide it from view. Grandpa came up to us and said,

"Good for you, boys! You've got down to work your very first day. Whose idea was it to nail another handle to the gate?"

"Shurik's," I said.

Grandpa cleared his throat.

"Well, now we'll have two handles on the gate, one higher up the other lower down, so that when a very short person comes calling he can pull the bottom one." Then he noticed the galosh.

"What's this?"

I snorted, knowing that Shurik was in for it. Shurik turned red. He didn't know what to say.

"What's this, a mailbox?" Grandpa asked. "If the mailman comes round and sees nobody's home he can put our letters in the galosh. That's a very clever idea."

"I thought of it myself."

"Indeed?"

"Honest!"

"Good for you."

All during lunch Grandpa kept telling Grandma what a smart fellow Shurik was. "It's really amazing. We'd never have thought of it. Imagine, he nailed a galosh to the gate! I've been saying we needed a mailbox, but never got around to it."

"I can take a hint. I'll get us a mailbox," Grandma said. "Meanwhile, the galosh can serve as one."

After lunch Shurik ran off to the orchard. Grandpa said to me,

"Shurik has really been busy this morning. I'm sure you were up to something, too, Kolya. You might as well confess and make your Grandpa happy."

"I went fishing, but I didn't catch anything."

"Where'd you go?"

"To the pond."

"No wonder. They're just dug it. I don't even think there are frogs in it yet. I'll tell you what. You go down to the river. The current is fast under the wooden bridge. That's where you fish."

Grandpa went back to work. I got my rod and said to Shurik:

"Let's go down to the river to fish."

"You're trying to make up to me, aren't you?"

"What for?"

"So I won't put any more spells on the fish."

"I couldn't care less."

I took my box of worms and the empty jam jar for my fish and set off. Shurik tagged along behind. When we got to the river I found a good spot near the bridge and cast my line.

Shurik stayed close to me, mumbling,

Be he alive, or be he dead,
I'll grind his bones to make
my bread!

He'd be still for a few moments and then start in again,

Be he alive, or be he dead...

Suddenly, I had a bite. I yanked at the line. The fish glittered in the air, slipped off the hook and fell wriggling onto the grass at the very edge of the bank.

"Catch it!" Shurik yelled and threw himself on the fish.

It slipped away and was thrashing about at the water's edge. Shurik finally got hold of it. I filled the jar with water and he dropped the fish in.

"It's a perch," he said as he examined it. "I'm sure it is. See the lines on it? Can it be mine?"

"All right. We'll catch a lot more."

We fished for hours that day and caught six little perch, four gudgeons and one small ruff. On the way home Shurik carried the jar of fish. He wouldn't let me hold it. He was so proud he never minded his galosh missing from the gate. There was a shiny blue mailbox in its place.

"Who cares?" he said. "And anyway, the mailbox is nicer."

Then he ran off to show Grandma the fish. She was very pleased.

After a while I said to Shurik, "See, your magic spell didn't work. It's not worth much, is it? And I don't believe in it."

"I don't, either. You have to be real dumb to believe in magic. Or very old."

This made Grandma laugh, because she was very old, but she didn't believe in magic spells, either.

The Crucian Carp

Vitalik's mother made him a present of a crucian carp and a small aquarium for it to live in. It was a beautiful little fish and Vitalik was very excited about it at first—he fed it and changed the water in the bowl regularly. But after a time he lost interest in it and even forgot to feed it sometimes.

Vitalik had a kitten, too, called Murzik, a grey fluffy kitten with large green eyes. Murzik loved to watch the fish swimming about in its bowl. He could sit for hours beside the bowl with his eyes glued to the carp.

"You'd better keep an eye on Murzik," Vitalik's mother warned him. "He'll eat up your fish one of these days."

"No, he won't," said Vitalik. "I'll see he doesn't."

One day when his mother was out, Vitalik's friend Seryozha came to see him. When he saw the fish he said:

"That's a nice little carp you've got there. I'll give you a whistle for it if you like."

"What do I need a whistle for?" said Vitalik. "I think a fish is much better than a whistle."

"No, it isn't. You can blow on a whistle, but what can you do with a fish?"

"You can watch it swimming in its bowl. And that's more fun than blowing a whistle."

"Rats," said Seryozha. "Besides, the cat can gobble up your fish any time and then you won't have a whistle or a fish either. But the cat won't eat a whistle, because it's made of iron."

"Mummy doesn't like me to swap things. She'll buy me a whistle if I want one."

"She'd never get one like this," said Seryozha. "You can't buy them in the shops. This is a real policeman's whistle. When I go outside in our yard and whistle everyone thinks it's the police."

Seryozha took a whistle out of his pocket and blew a piercing blast on it.

"Let me have a try," begged Vitalik.

He took the whistle and blew on it. It responded with a loud trill. Vitalik was enchanted. He longed to own the whistle but at the same time he didn't want to part with his fish.

"Where would you put the fish if I swapped with you? You haven't got an aquarium."

"I'd put it in a jam jar. We have a big one at home."

"All right, take it," said Vitalik, finally giving in.

They had a hard time taking the fish out of the bowl. It kept slipping out of their hands. At last, after splashing water all over the floor, Seryozha managed to catch it, wetting his sleeves up to the elbow in the process.

"I've got him!" he shouted. "Quick, bring me a glass of water."

Vitalik brought a mug full of water and Seryozha dropped the fish into it. Then the two friends went to Seryozha's place. The jam jar turned out to be not quite so big as Seryozha had said, and the fish had much less room than in its bowl. The boys stood watching it swimming back and forth in the jar. Seryozha was very pleased but Vitalik felt a little sad. He was sorry he had given away his fish, and what is most important, he was afraid to tell his mother that he had exchanged it for a whistle.

"Perhaps she won't notice that it's gone," he thought as he walked home.

But as soon as he came home his mother asked him:

"Where is your fish?"

Vitalik did not know what to say.

"Did Murzik eat it up?"

"I don't know," Vitalik mumbled.

"There you are," said his mother. "He waited until everybody was out, fished it out of the bowl and gobbled it up. The wicked cat! Where is he? Find him at once."

"Murzik! Murzik!" Vitalik called, but Murzik was nowhere to be seen.

"He must have jumped out through the window," said his mother. "Go outside and have a look."

Vitalik put on his coat and went outside.

"Oh dear, what shall I do?" he thought miserably. "Now Murzik will get a hiding because of me."

He was just about to go back and say he couldn't find

Murzik, when Murzik himself sprang out of a hole and ran over to the door.

"Murzik darling, don't go home," said Vitalik. "You'll get a hiding from Mummy."

Murzik purred and rubbed himself against Vitalik's leg and miaowed softly.

"Don't you understand, you silly cat?" said Vitalik. "You mustn't go in."

But Murzik wouldn't listen. He looked up adoringly at Vitalik, rubbing himself against his legs and pushing at him gently with his head as if begging him to hurry up and open the door. Vitalik tried to drag him away from the door, but Murzik wouldn't go. Vitalik opened the door quickly, slipped inside and closed it before Murzik had time to follow him.

"Miaow!" cried Murzik from the other side of the door.

Vitalik went out again: "Keep quiet, you silly. Mummy will hear and you'll get beaten!"

He grabbed the cat and started pushing him back into the hole under the house. Murzik resisted with all four paws. He didn't want to go back into the basement.

"Get in, silly," muttered Vitalik. "And stay there."

At last he managed to push the kitten through the hole, all except his tail which still stuck out. The tail wiggled angrily for a little, then disappeared inside. Vitalik was glad: he thought Murzik understood that he must sit tight in the cellar. But the next minute Murzik stuck his head out of the hole again.

"Where are you going, stupid!" hissed Vitalik, covering the opening with his hands. "Didn't I tell you you can't go home just now."

"Miaow!" cried Murzik.

"Miaow yourself," snapped Vitalik. "Oh dear, what shall I do with you?"

He looked around for something to cover the hole with. There was a brick lying on the ground near the cellar. Vitalik picked it

up and stood it up against the hole.

"There," he said. "Now you can't get out. You stay there for a while. Tomorrow Mummy will forget all about the fish and then I'll let you out."

Vitalik went back into the house and told his mother he couldn't find Murzik anywhere.

"Never mind," said Mummy. "He'll come back. I shan't forgive him for this."

At dinner that day Vitalik felt very miserable. He didn't want to eat anything.

"Here I am having dinner," he thought, "and poor Murzik is sitting there in the dark cellar."

When his mother left the table, Vitalik took his portion of meat from his plate, hid it in his pocket and ran out to the cellar. He moved the brick aside and called softly: "Murzik! Murzik!"

But Murzik didn't answer. Vitalik bent down and peeped through the hole, but it was too dark to see anything.

"Murzik! Murzik!" Vitalik called. "Do come out, there's a good cat. I've got a nice bit of meat for you."

But Murzik did not appear.

"You won't? All right, you can stay there hungry," said Vitalik and went home in a huff.

At home he felt very lonely without Murzik. Besides, his heart was heavy because he had deceived his mother.

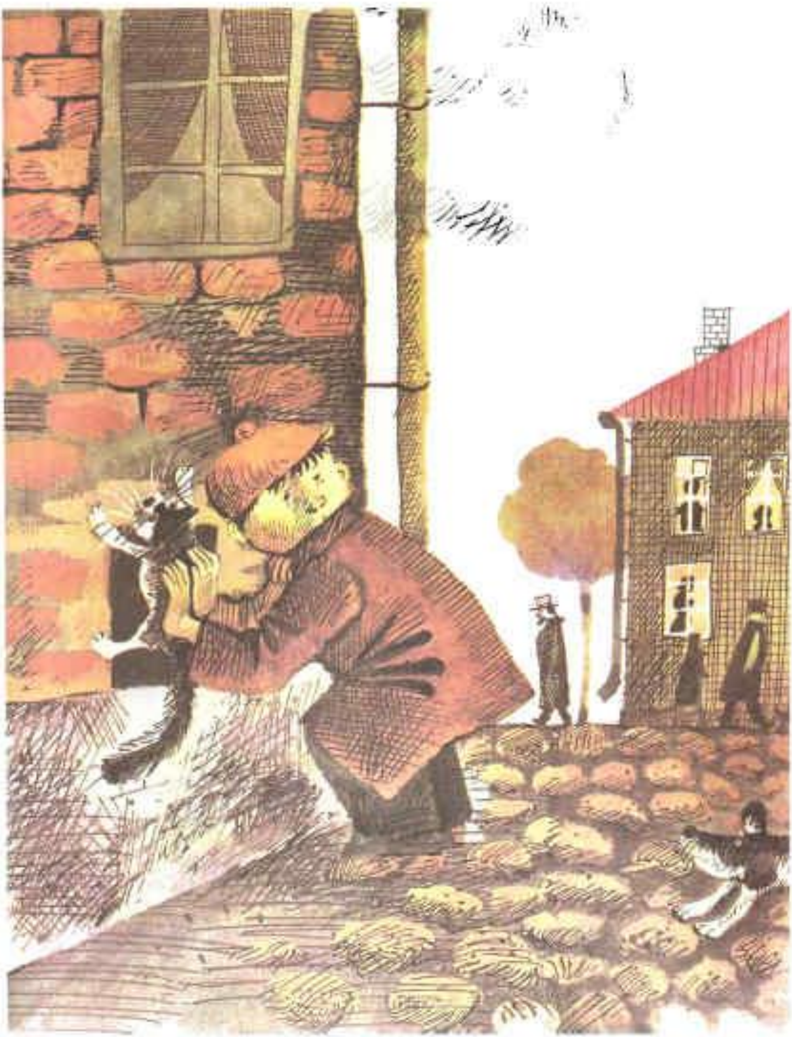
His mother saw that he looked unhappy.

"Cheer up," she said. "I'll get you another fish."

"I don't want a fish," he said.

He wanted to own up to his mother about everything but he hadn't the courage, so he said nothing. Just then there was a faint scratching noise outside the window, followed by loud "Miaow!"

Vitalik looked up and saw Murzik standing on the window-ledge. How had he got out of the cellar?



"Aha!" cried Vitalik's mother. "There he is, the rascal! Come here, you bad cat!"

She opened the little window and Murzik came in. She tried to grab him, but he must have guessed that something was wrong because he darted under the table.

"Oh, the cunning little beast," said Vitalik's mother. "He knows he's guilty. Vitalik, help me catch him."

Vitalik crawled under the table. When Murzik saw him he fled for cover under the sofa. Vitalik was glad, and though he dutifully crawled after him, he made as much noise as he could so as to give Murzik a chance to escape. Murzik sprang out from under the sofa and Vitalik started chasing him round and round the room.

"Don't make such a noise," said his mother. "You'll never catch him that way."

Murzik jumped on to the window-sill where the empty fish bowl stood and was about to jump back through the window but missed his footing and fell into the fish bowl with a great splash! The next moment he was out, shaking himself furiously. Mother seized him by the scruff of the neck.

"Now, I'll teach you a good lesson."

"Mummy, Mummy! Please don't beat him!" cried Vitalik and burst into tears.

"Now, don't go pitying him. He didn't pity the fish, did he?"

"He isn't to blame, Mummy."

"Oh, isn't he? Who ate the fish, then?"

"It wasn't him."

"Then who was it?"

"It was me..."

"What? You ate the fish?"

"No, I didn't eat it. I... I exchanged it for a whistle."

"For a what?"

"For this." And Vitalik pulled the whistle out of his pocket and showed it to his mother.

"You naughty boy, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"I didn't mean it, Mummy. Seryozha said: 'Let's swap,' so I did."

"I meant you ought to be ashamed of yourself for not telling the truth. I blamed it on Murzik. Is it nice to shift the blame on others?"

"I was afraid you would scold me."

"Only cowards are afraid to tell the truth. How would you have felt if I had punished Murzik?"

"I'll never do it again."

"Well, mind you don't. I forgive you this time because you owned up."

Vitalik picked up Murzik and took him over to the radiator to dry. With his wet fur sticking up all over Murzik looked more like a hedgehog than a cat. He looked skinny too, as if he hadn't eaten for a whole week. Vitalik took the piece of meat out of his pocket and laid it in front of Murzik. Murzik ate it up with great zest and climbed on to Vitalik's lap, curled up in a ball and began to purr as loudly as he could. The sound of his purring made Vitalik somehow feel very happy. It must have been the purring because what else could it be?

The Patch *

Bobka had a really super pair of trousers: khaki or, rather, a sort of camouflage colour. Bobka was very fond of them and always boasting about them:

"Hey, boys, take a look at my trousers. Real soldier-style."

Of course, they were the envy of all his friends. Nobody had khaki trousers like them.

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One day Bobka was climbing over a fence when he got caught on a nail and ripped his beloved trousers. In his anger he all but burst into tears, and raced home to ask his mother to mend them. Mother was very cross.

"If you go clambering over fences and tear your trousers, do you expect me to do the darning every time?"

"I won't do it again," said Bobka. "Please, Mum."

"Darn them yourself," said his mother.

"But I don't know how," he complained.

"You tore them, you mend them," she said.

"All right then," burst out Bobka. "I shall walk about like this."

And he went out into the yard. His friends at once saw the hole in his trousers and began to laugh.

"A fine soldier you make," they called, "with a hole in your pants."

Bobka tried to explain,

"I asked my Mum to darn them, but she wouldn't."

"We didn't know soldiers' mothers have to mend their trousers," some of the lads teased him. "A soldier should be able to do everything himself: and that means sewing on a patch or a button too."

Bobka's face fell. He went home, asked his Mother for a needle and cotton and a piece of khaki material. Out of the khaki cloth he cut a patch about the size of a cucumber and started to sew it to his trousers. It was no easy job. Bobka was in too much of a hurry and kept pricking his fingers.

"What do you prick me for? You stupid needle!" he kept moaning to the needle. And he tried to hold it by the very end so that it did not prick him.

At long last the patch was sewn on. It stuck out of his trousers like a shrivelled mushroom, and the cloth around it was all wrinkled, making one leg shorter than the other.

"That won't do at all," Bobka spluttered as he inspected his

trousers. "That's even worse than it was before. I shall have to do it all over again."

So he took a knife and started to unpick his stitches; then, righting the patch, he set to work once more, first drawing a pencil line right round the patch very neatly. This time he did not hurry, he sewed carefully all the time making sure that the patch had not overstepped his line.

It took him ages to do the job, he moaned and groaned, yet when it was over it was a real treat to look at. It was sewn on perfectly, smoothly and so firmly that you couldn't tear it off with your teeth.

At last Bobka pulled on his trousers and went out into the yard. His friends clustered round.

"That's super," they said. "Just look at that, the patch is traced in pencil; anyone can see you've sewn it on yourself. You're a marvel."

Bobka did a couple of turns so that everyone could see clearly.

"I should learn to sew on buttons as well," he sighed. "What a pity none came off. Never mind, sooner or later they'll get torn off and then I'll certainly sew them on myself."

Sasha *

Sasha kept on at his mother to buy him a cap gun.

"What do you want that for?" asked his mother. "It's dangerous."

"What's dangerous about it?" he persisted. "If it fired bullets maybe, but not caps. You can't kill anyone with it."

"You never know what might happen," replied his mother. "A cap might jump out and hit you in the eye."

"No it won't," Sasha said. "I'll screw up my eyes while I'm firing it."

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"No, no, all sorts of awful things can happen with those guns. If you don't shoot someone you can scare the living daylights out of them." Nor did she buy him the gun.

Now, Sasha had two older sisters, Marina and Ira. He now turned to them.

"Please buy me a cap gun, dear sisters," he implored them. "I want one so much. I'll always do whatever you say, if you do."

"You really are artful, young Sashka," said Marina. "When you need something, you start buttering us up and calling us your 'dear sisters'. But once Mum's out of the house, you'll change your tune."

"No I won't, I won't. I'll behave myself, you see if I won't."

"All right," said Ira. "Marina and I will think it over. If you give your word to be a good boy, it just may be that we shall buy you the gun."

"I promise, I promise," said Sasha. "Anything you like, if only you get me the gun."

The next day his sisters presented him with the gun and a box of caps. The gun was brand new and shiny, and there were lots of caps: maybe fifty or a hundred. He could fire away to his heart's delight. Sasha pranced around the room in sheer joy, he hugged the gun, even kissed it, saying,

"My darling, dear little cap gun. How I love you."

After that he scratched his name on the handle and began to fire it. At once the room smelled of the caps, and half an hour later the room was quite blue with smoke.

"That's enough shooting for now," said Ira finally. "It makes me jump each time that gun goes off."

"Cowardy custard!" retorted Sasha. "All girls are cowards."

"Right, I'll show you what cowards we are when I take the gun off you," said Marina.

"I'm going out into the yard then," replied Sasha, "to scare the children with my gun."

And out he went. But there was no one in sight. So straight

out the gates he went, and that is where our story really has its beginning. Just at that moment, an old woman was coming down the street. Sashka watched her go by and then—BANG!—he fired his gun just behind her. With a startled cry the old woman stopped in her tracks. Turning round, she said.

"Oh dear, you gave me such a fright. It was you, wasn't it, who shot that gun?"

"No," said Sashka concealing the gun behind him.

"Do you think I can't see the gun in your hands?" said the old woman. "And you're trying to tell me lies. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I'm going straight to the police station."

With a shake of her finger she crossed the road and disappeared down a side street.

"Now I'm for it," thought Sasha. "It looks like she really has gone to the police to complain."

He ran home all out of breath.

"What are you looking so scared for as if a wolf is chasing you?" asked Ira.

"Nothing," said Sasha.

"You'd better own up; it's written all over your face that you're up to something."

"I'm not up to anything," panted Sasha. "It's just that I frightened some old woman."

"What old woman?"

"What do you mean 'what old woman'?" said Sasha. "Just some old woman who was coming down the street; I got her in my sights and shot her with my gun."

"What did you do that for?" asked his sister.

"Don't know myself," said Sasha. "She was walking along and I thought to myself: 'Go on, shoot her.' And I did."

"What happened to her?" asked Ira.

"Nothing. She's gone to the police to complain."

"You see," said Ira, "you promised to behave yourself and now look what you've done."

"It's not my fault the old woman is such a scaredy-cat," said Sasha.

"Now a policeman will come and give you what for," continued Ira. "Then you'll know what you get for scaring people."

"How will he find me?" asked Sasha. "He won't know where I live. He doesn't even know my name."

"He'll find out, don't you worry," said Ira. "Policemen know everything."

For a whole hour Sasha sat meekly at home glancing out of the window all the while to see if a policeman was coming. But no policeman came into sight. After a time he calmed down, perked up a bit and said, "Probably the old grannie wanted to put the wind up me so as to teach me a lesson."

He made up his mind to fire his beloved cap gun and slipped his hand into his pocket. He found the box of caps but no gun. He searched around in his other pocket, but that was empty. Then he began to search the room from top to bottom. He peered under the tables and the settee. The gun had vanished as if the earth had opened up and swallowed it. Tears welled up in his eyes.

"I hardly had time to play with it properly," he sniffed. "Such a lovely gun it was, too."

"Perhaps you lost it in the yard?" asked Ira.

"More likely I dropped it outside the gates," Sasha suddenly thought. He opened the door and rushed across the yard and out into the street. But there was no sign of his gun.

"Someone else must have picked it up and kept it for himself," he pondered miserably. Then all at once he caught sight of a policeman marching quickly across the street from the direction of the side street. And he was coming straight for Sasha's house.

"He's after me," thought Sasha. "That old woman must have told on me."

And he raced home as fast as his legs would carry him.

"Well, found it?" asked Marina and Ira.

"Shhh!" whispered Sasha. "Policeman's on his way."

"Where to?"

"Here, to our house," muttered Sasha.

"Where did you see him?"

"In the street."

Marina and Ira began to laugh at him.

"What a coward you are! One look at a policeman and it scares the pants off you. That policeman is probably on his way somewhere else and isn't coming here at all."

"He doesn't scare me," said Sasha, now plucking up courage. "What's a policeman to me anyway?"

At that moment heavy steps were heard at the door, and suddenly the bell rang. Marina and Ira ran to open the door. Sasha poked his head round the hallway and hissed,

"Don't let him in."

But Marina had already opened the door. And there stood a policeman, with bright and shiny buttons on his tunic. Sasha dropped on all fours and crawled behind the settee.

"Now then, young ladies, where's Flat No. 6?" came the voice of the policeman.

"It's not here," answered Ira. "This is No. 1; if you want No. 6 you must go into the yard, and it's the first door on the right."

"Go into the yard, the first door on the right?" the policeman repeated slowly.

"Yes," said Ira.

Sasha now knew that the policeman hadn't come for him after all, and he was just about to creep out from behind the settee when the policeman asked, "By the way, you don't have a boy named Sasha living here, do you?"

"We do," replied Ira.

"Well, that's the very fellow I want," said the policeman and advanced into the room.

Marina and Ira followed him into the room and saw that Sasha had disappeared somewhere. Marina even glanced under the settee. Sasha saw her and silently threatened her with his clenched fist so that she wouldn't give him away.

"Well then, where's your Sasha?" asked the policeman.

The girls were very frightened for Sasha and did not know what to answer. Finally Marina said, "You see, it's like this, he's not home right now. I think he's gone for a walk."

"What do you know about him?" asked Ira.

"What do I know?" said the policeman. "I know his name's Sasha. And I know he used to have a brand new gun and that he doesn't have it any more."

"He knows everything!" thought Sasha. His nose began to itch with fear, and suddenly he let out a sneeze: "Aachooh!"

"Who's that?" asked the policeman in surprise.

"That's our... That's our dog," Marina told a lie.

"What's it doing under the settee then?" asked the policeman.

"Oh, it always sleeps under the settee," said Marina, continuing to lie.

"What's its name?" asked the policeman.

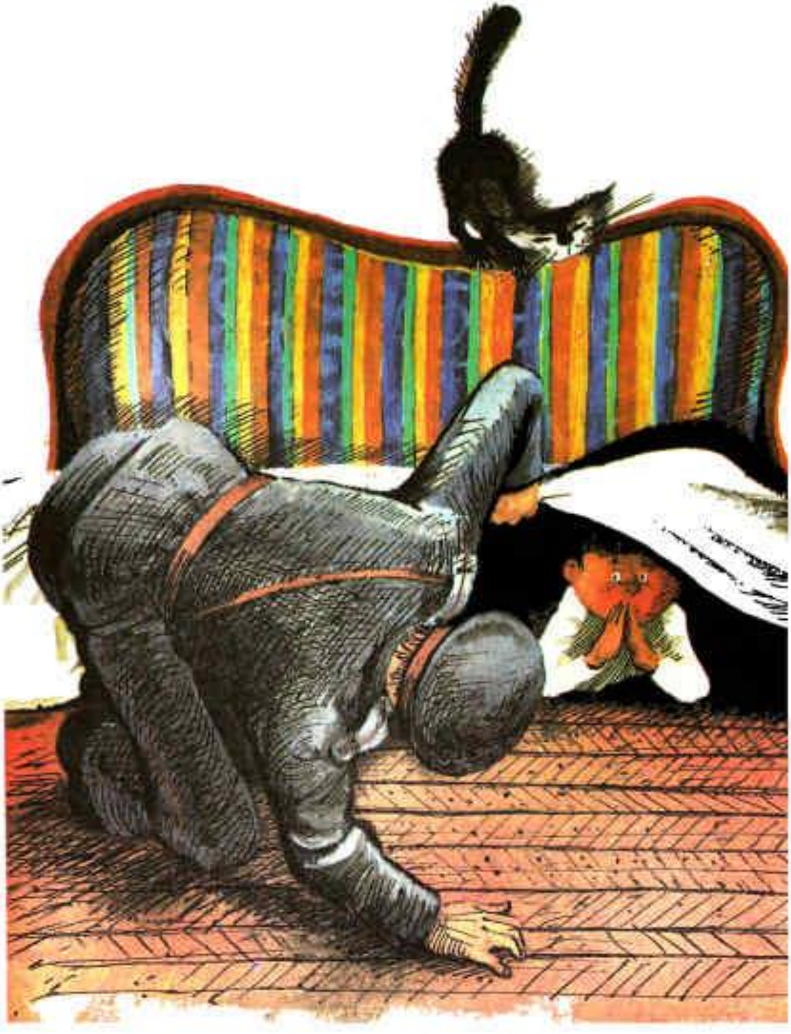
"Um... Bobby," said Marina going as red as a beetroot.

"Bobby, Bobby, come on, lad!" called the policeman. And he began to whistle for the dog. "Why doesn't it want to come out? Here, boy. Here, boy! No, no good. Is it a good dog? What breed is it?"

"Ummm..." said Marina, trying to drag it out as she thought desperately for an answer. "Ummm..." She just couldn't think what sort of breeds dogs had. "Now what is its breed?" she said. "What is it now? It's a good breed, I know that... Oh yes, a long-haired foxterrier. That's it."

"Oh, what an excellent dog!" said the policeman brightening up. "I know it well. It has such a lovely furry nose."

He bent down and looked under the settee. Sasha was lying there more dead than alive and stared at the policeman



wide-eyed. The policeman even whistled from amazement.

"So that's the sort of foxterrier you've got here!" he said. "What are you doing under the settee, eh? Here, boy, come on out, I've got you now."

"I won't come out," wailed Sasha.

"Why not?" asked the policeman.

"You'll take me down to the station," said Sasha.

"What for?"

"For the old woman."

"What old woman?"

"The one I shot, and she got scared."

"I've no idea what old woman you're going on about," said the policeman.

"He went outside to fire his cap gun," explained Ira, "and an old lady passed by and was frightened."

"Ah, so that's it," said the policeman. "So it is his gun?"

And he took from his pocket a brand-new new shiny pistol.

"That's it, that's it," exclaimed Ira. "Marina and I bought it for him and he lost it. Where did you find it?"

"Just nearby, in the yard, by your door," replied the policeman calmly. "Well now, own up, why did you scare the old lady?"

"I didn't mean to," said Sasha from under the settee.

"You're telling lies," said the policeman. "I can see it in your eyes. Tell me the truth and I'll let you have your gun back straightaway."

"What will happen to me if I tell the truth?" asked Sasha.

"Nothing'll happen. You'll get your gun back, that's all."

"Won't you take me to the police station?"

"No."

"I didn't mean to frighten the old woman," said Sasha. "I only wanted to see if she would be scared or not."

"Now that's not nice, young fellow-me-lad," said the policeman. "For that you really ought to be taken to the police

station; but it can't be helped: since I've given my word I'll have to keep it. I shan't take you in this time. But just you watch out: if I catch you getting into any mischief again, you'll be for the high jump. Right, come on out of there and take your cap gun."

"No, I'd prefer to come out afterwards, when you've gone," said Sasha.

"What a funny fellow!" laughed the policeman.

He put the gun on the settee and left. Marina hurried to show the policeman the whereabouts of No. 6, while Sasha crept out from under the settee, set eyes on his gun and cried,

"Here it is, my precious gun. Returned to me once more!"

He seized his gun and said, "What I can't make out is how that policeman came to know my name."

"But you wrote your name yourself on the gun," said Ira.

At that moment Marina returned and really set about her brother.

"What a rotten trick to play!" she shouted at him. "Because of you I had to tell lies to the policeman. I could have burned with shame. Just you try any more of your tricks and you won't catch me sticking up for you. That's the last time!"

"I won't be playing tricks again, I promise you," said Sasha. "I know now that I shouldn't scare people."

Bobby Visits Barboss *

Once upon a time there was a dog named Barboss. And he had a friend called Vasska, who was a cat. They both lived with Grandad. When the old man went off to work, Barboss guarded the house and Vasska caught mice.

One time when the old man had gone to work, Vasska ran off somewhere leaving Barboss at home alone. Being bored with nothing to do the old dog climbed onto the window-sill and looked out of the window, gaping in all directions.

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"It's all right for the old man," thought Barboss, "he's gone to work and has something to do. Vasska has a good time too: he's run off to prowl across the rooftops. But I've got to sit at home and guard the flat."

Just at that moment Barboss's friend Bobby came running down the street. They often met in the yard and played together. When Barboss caught sight of his friend, he perked up.

"Hey, Bobby, where are you off to?" he shouted.

"Nowhere," said Bobby. "I'm just running. And what are you sitting at home for? Let's go for a walk."

"I can't," answered Barboss. "Grandad's instructed me to guard the house. It'd be better for you to visit me."

"Won't anyone shoo me out?" asked Bobbie.

"No, Grandad's left for work. There's no one home. Climb in through the window."

Bobby climbed through the open window and began to look about him in curiosity. "You've a fine life," he told Barboss. "You live in a house, I in a kennel. The roof leaks, I've no room to move about. Pretty awful conditions, I can tell you."

"Yes," replied Barboss, "we have a decent flat: two living rooms with a kitchen and then there's the bathroom. Go where you wish."

"My mistress doesn't even let me into the hallway," complained Bobby. "She says I'm a yard-dog and have to live in a kennel. One time I got into one of the rooms—you ought to have seen the fuss. They screamed and yelled, even beat me with a stick." He scratched behind his ear with his paw, and then noticed the clock on the wall with its pendulum.

"What on earth's that thing hanging on the wall?" he asked. "All that tick-tock, tick-tock, with its tail hanging down."

"That's a clock," replied Barboss. "Haven't you ever seen a clock before?"

"No. What is it for?"

Barboss really wasn't sure himself, but he tried to explain, "Well, it's like this, you know ... a clock ... it goes..."

"How do you mean 'it goes'?" said Bobby in surprise. "It doesn't have any legs, does it?"

"Well that's just a figure of speech; it doesn't go anywhere actually, it just ticks away and strikes."

"Oho, so it starts hitting people, does it?" said Bobby.

"No, no, how can it hit anyone?"

"But you said yourself that it strikes..."

"I meant that it chimes: boom, boom!"

"Well, you should have said so."

Bobby noticed a comb on the table and asked,

"And what sort of saw do you have here?"

"What saw? That's a comb."

"What's it for?"

"You are a numbskull," said Barboss. "Anyone can see at once that you've lived an age in a kennel. Don't you know what a comb's for? To comb your hair with."

"How come? To comb your hair with?"

Barboss picked up the comb and began to comb the hair on his head with it. "Just look, this is the way to comb your hair. Go to the mirror and comb your own hair."

Bobby took the comb, went over to the mirror and stared at his reflection. "Hey, look here," he shouted, pointing to the mirror, "there's another dog!"

"That's you, silly, in the mirror!" laughed Barboss.

"What do you mean, it's me? I'm here, and that other dog's there."

Barboss walked over to the mirror. Bobby saw his reflection and cried, "Look, look, now there are two of them!"

"No, no," said Barboss. "That's not two of them, it's two of us. They in the mirror are not alive."

"How do you mean, not alive?" cried Bobby. "They're moving, look."

"No, you silly fellow," said Barboss. "It's us that are moving. Don't you see that one of the dogs is like me?"

"True, it is!" said Bobby with relief. "It's the spitting image of you."

"And the other dog is like you."

"Never!" replied Bobby. "It's a pretty awful-looking mongrel with crooked paws."

"The same paws as yours."

"No, you're having me on! You've put two strange dogs in there, you don't think I'll swallow it, do you?" said Bobby.

He began to comb his hair in front of the mirror, then suddenly burst out laughing.

"Just look at that, that silly fool in the mirror is combing his hair too. What an idiot!"

Barboss only snorted and moved away. When Bobby finished preening himself, he put the comb back and said,

"It's a funny place you've got here. A strange sort of clock, mirror with dogs, flibberty-gibbets and combs."

"We've even got a television," boasted Barboss pointing to the television set.

"What's that for?" asked Bobby.

"Now that's a marvellous thing: it can do anything—sing, play, even show pictures."

"What? That old box?"

"Yes."

"Never on your life!"

"On my honour!"

"All right then, let's hear it play."

Barboss switched on the television. And music came out. The dogs were happy and began to prance about the room; they

danced and danced till they were fit to drop.

"That's made me hungry," said Bobby.

"Sit down at the table and be my guest," suggested Barboss.

Bobby took a seat at the table, while Barboss opened the cupboard revealing a bowl of jelly on the bottom shelf and a big pie on the top. He took out the jelly bowl, set it on the floor while he climbed up to the topmost shelf to reach the pie. As he climbed down with it, his hind leg went straight into the jelly and he slipped backwards right into the bowl. Now his back was all covered in red jelly.

"Bobby, quick, come and eat the jelly," cried Barboss.

"Where's the jelly?" he said.

"All over my back," said Barboss. "Lick it off."

So he did without second bidding.

"Now that's what I call a tasty jelly," he said.

Together they then carried the pie to the table, sat down with it on top of the table to get at it better, and munched and talked over their meal.

"You certainly live well," said Bobby. "You've got everything."

"Yes," agreed Barboss. "I live well all right. I do what I like: if I want to comb my hair, I do so; if I want I can play with the television. I eat and drink what I like or even lounge about in bed all day."

"Doesn't your old man mind you messing up his bed?"

"What? It's my bed, not his!" said Barboss.

"But where does the old man sleep?"

"Over there in the corner, on the mat."

Once he'd got started, Barboss could not help lying further.

"Here everything is mine," he boasted. "The table's mine, the cupboard's mine, and all that's in it is mine too."

"And can I have a lie on your bed?" asked Bobby. "Never in my life have I slept in a bed."

"Come on then," agreed Barboss.

They both sprawled across the bed. As they were lying there Bobby saw a leather thong hanging on the wall.

"What's that thong for up there?" he asked.

"The thong? Oh, that's for old Grandad. If he doesn't behave himself, I just give him a taste of it," replied Barboss.

"Very good," said Bobby approvingly.

They lay there on the bed, got nice and snug and fell asleep. They didn't even hear the old man coming in from work. And when he saw the two dogs on his bed, he took down the thong from the wall and raised it threateningly. In great fright Bobby leapt through the window and ran straight to his kennel, while Barboss dived under the bed and couldn't even be fetched out with the broomstick. He sat there till evening.

Vasska the cat returned home in the evening, saw Barboss cowering under the bed, and realised what was up at once.

"Hey, Vasska," said Barboss, "I've been punished again. I don't even know myself what for. Fetch me a bit of sausage if you can scrounge any from Grandad."

Vasska sidled up to the old man, began to miaow and rub his back up against the man's legs. Grandad threw him a piece of sausage. Vasska ate half himself and took the other piece to poor old Barboss under the bed.

Story-Tellers

Mishutka and Stasik were sitting on a bench in the garden, talking.

But they were not talking about the kind of things boys usually talk about. They were telling each other tall tales, as if they had made a bet to see who could lie the best.

"How old are you?" Mishutka said.

"Ninety-five. How old are you?"

"I'm a hundred and forty. You know," Mishutka said, "I used to be very big, as big as Uncle Boris. But then I got little again."

Stasik said,

"I used to be little, then I got big, and then I got little again. Soon I'll start getting bigger again."

"When I was big I could swim across the river," Mishutka said.

"Huh! I could swim across the sea."

"So what! I could swim across the ocean."

"I used to know how to fly!"

"Let's see you do it!"

"I can't any more. I forgot how to."

"Once, when I was swimming in the sea," Mishutka said, "a shark headed straight for me. I socked it hard, but it snapped my head off anyway."

"That's not true!"

"Yes, it is!"

"Why didn't you die?"

"Why should I? I swam back to the shore and went home."

"Without your head?"

"Sure. What do I need a head for?"

"How could you see where you were going if you didn't have a head?"

"I just kept on walking. It's not hard to walk without your head."

"How come you have a head now?"

"It's a new one that grew on my neck."

"He sure made up a good story," Stasik thought enviously. He wanted to think up something still better. So he said:

"That's nothing! I went to Africa once and a crocodile gobbled me up."

"That's a lie!" Mishutka said and laughed.

"No, it isn't."
"How come you're still alive?"
"He spat me out later."
Mishutka said nothing. Now he wanted to think of a still better story than Stasik. After thinking for several minutes, he said:
"Once, I was walking down the street. There were cars and trucks and trolleys everywhere."
"I know, I know!" Stasik shouted. "Now you're going to say that you were run over. You lied about that already."
"I wasn't going to say that."
"All right. Keep on lying."
"Well, I was just walking along, minding my own business. Suddenly I saw a bus coming towards me. I didn't notice it until I stepped on it. Cr-rack! I just crunched it to pieces."
"Ha-ha-ha! Some story!"
"It's the truth!"
"How could you crush a bus?"
"It was just a very small one. It was really a toy bus. A little boy was dragging it along on a string."
"That's nothing," said Stasik. "I once flew to the Moon."
"Come off it!" laughed Mishutka.
"Don't you believe me? Honest I did."
"How did you get there?"
"In a rocket, of course. How else could you get to the Moon? As if you didn't know!"
"And what did you see on the Moon?"
"Oh, er..." Stasik hesitated. "What did I see there? I didn't see anything."
"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed Mishutka. "And he says he flew to the Moon!"
"Of course I did."
"Then why didn't you see anything?"

"Because it was dark. I flew there at night. In a dream. I got

into a rocket and flew off into space. Whee! And then back again... Thump! And then I woke up."

"Oh," said Mishutka slowly. "You should have said so before. I didn't know you went there in a dream."

Just then Igor, a neighbour's boy, came over and sat down on the bench beside them. He listened to them for a while and then said:

"What a pack of lies! Aren't you ashamed of yourselves!"

"Why should we be? We're not fooling anyone," Stasik said. "We're just thinking things up, like making up fairy-tales."

"Fairy-tales!" Igor snorted. "What a baby's game!"

"You think it's so easy to make up stories?"

"Sure it is."

"All right! You think of something."

"Just give me a second to think and I will," Igor said.

Mishutka and Stasik were glad there was someone else to listen to, so they sat back and waited.

"Wait a sec," Igor said again. "Uhh... Mmmm... Umm..."

"All you're saying is 'uh' and 'mm'!"

"Wait a minute. Give me a chance to think."

"Go on and think."

"Uhh..." Igor said again and looked at the sky. "Wait! Ummm..."

"Well? You said it was easy. You said it was a baby's game."

"Wait! Ah, I know! Once I teased a dog and it bit me. Here, you can still see the scar on my leg."

"But what did you make up about it?"

"Nothing. I told you exactly what happened."

"And you said you knew how to make up stories!"

"I do, but not like you. You make up a pack of lies, and what's the use? I lied yesterday and really had a good time."

"Why?"

"Because. Yesterday my ma and dad went visiting, and Tanya and I stayed home. Tanya went to bed, but I got into the

cupboard and ate half a jar of jam. Then I thought I'd get a licking, so I smeared some of the jam on her mouth. When Mummie came home she said, 'Who ate the jam?' and I said, 'Tanya'. Mummie went over to her and saw that she had jam round her mouth. This morning Mummie punished her, but she gave me some more jam. See what a good time I had!"

"Your sister was punished because of you, and you had a good time!" Mishutka said.

"So what?"

"So nothing. But you're a ... what-do-you-call-it? A *real* liar! That's what you are!"

"You're a bunch of liars yourselves!"

"Go away! We don't even want to sit next to you."

"I wouldn't even stay here if you asked me."

Igor got up and walked away. Mishutka and Stasik decided to go home, too. On the way they passed an ice-cream stand. They stopped and dug into their pockets, to see how much money they had. There was only enough for one eskimo.

"Let's buy one and divide it in half," Stasik said.

The lady handed them an eskimo.

"Come on, let's go home," Mishutka said. "Then we can cut it with a knife and it'll be even."

"All right."

They met Tanya on the stairs. Her eyes were red from crying.

"What were you crying about?" Mishutka asked.

"Mummie wouldn't let me go outside to play."

"Why not?"

"'Cause of the jam. But I didn't eat it. Igor said I did. He must have eaten it, and then he said I did."

"Sure he ate it. He even boasted about it. Don't cry. Come on up to my house, and I'll give you my half of ice-cream," Mishutka said.

"And I'll give you my half, I'll just have a lick and then I'll give it to you," Stasik promised.

"Don't you want it?"

"No. We've already had ten each today," Stasik said.

"Let's cut it into three pieces," Tanya said.

"That's right," Stasik said. "'Cause if you eat the whole ice-cream yourself you'll get a sore throat."

So they went to Mishutka's house and cut the ice-cream into three even parts.

"Yummy! I love ice-cream," Mishutka said. "You know, once I ate a whole pail of ice-cream."

"No, you didn't!" Tanya said and laughed. "Nobody'll ever believe you."

"But it was just a very tiny pail. It was made out of paper, and was just as big as a cup."

And I'm Helping Too *

There once lived a little girl named Ninochka. She was five years old. She lived with her father, mother and old Grannie.

Ninochka's mother left for work every day, so the little girl stayed home with Grannie. And it was she who taught Ninochka to dress and wash herself, do up her buttons, tie the laces of her shoes, plait her hair in little pigtails and even write the letters of the alphabet.

* English translation © Progress Publishers 1981
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Ninochka spent all day with Grannie, only seeing her mother in early morning and evening. She saw her father very rarely, for he worked in the remote Arctic; he was a Polar pilot and only came home in the holidays.

Once a week, and sometimes even sooner, a letter would come from Ninochka's father. When Mother returned from work she would read the letter out while Ninochka and Grannie listened. And then they would all sit down to write Father a reply. Next day Mother would go off to work, and Grannie and Ninochka would take the letter to the post.

One day Ninochka and Grannie were going to post Father's letter; the weather was fine and sunny. Ninochka was wearing a lovely blue dress and white apron with a little red rabbit sewn on it. On their way back from the post Grannie took Ninochka by a short cut home over some wasteland. There used to be some small wooden cottages on that land, but now all the people had been rehoused in a big new block of flats; it was decided to plant trees and make a park here. At the moment, though, there was still no park, and in the corner lay a pile of old iron which workmen had forgotten to cart away: there were bits of old iron tubing, pieces of a radiator and a tangle of iron wiring.

Grannie even stopped by the pile of iron and said,

"And those girls and boys from the Young Pioneers don't know where to find old iron. Someone ought to tell them."

"What do Pioneers want iron for?" asked Ninochka.

"Well, they're always running in and out of the yards collecting waste iron to give to the state."

"Why the state?"

"The state sends it to a factory. At the factory they melt it down and make new things for people from it."

"Then who makes the Pioneers collect scrap?" asked Ninochka.

"No one makes them. They do it themselves. After all, children ought to help grown-ups."

"And did my Daddie help grown-ups when he was small?"
"He did."
"How about me, Grannie dear, why don't I help grown-ups?"
"So you will give a hand when you're just a teeny bit bigger," said Grannie with a smile.

Several days passed and Grannie had clean forgotten all about the conversation. But Ninochka never forgot anything. One day she was playing in the yard; Grannie had let her out all by herself. The children were not yet back from school so there wasn't a soul in the yard and Ninochka got bored.

All of a sudden she saw two unfamiliar boys come running through the yard gates. One of them was in long trousers and a navy blue reefing-jacket; the other wore a brown suit with short trousers; the boots on his feet were not black, they were some sort of muddy colour because he was always forgetting to clean them.

Neither boy paid any attention to Ninochka. They began to run around the yard peering into all the corners as if they were looking for something. Finally they came to a halt in the middle of the yard and the one in long trousers said,

"See, I told you so, nothing."

And the one in muddy boots wiped his nose, pushed his cap back and said: "Let's go and look in other yards, Valerik. We'll find some somewhere."

"You bet!" Valerik snorted.

They turned back towards the gates.

"Boys!" Ninochka called after them.

The lads stopped by the gates.

"What do you want?"

"What are you looking for?"

"What's it to do with you?"

"You're probably after old iron?"

"Well, what if we are? What's it to you?"

"I know where there's a lot of iron."

"How do you know?"

"I know so."

"You don't know anything."

"Oh yes I do, so."

"All right, then, show us where your iron is."

"It's not here. You have to go out on the street, then turn round there, then make another turning over there, then across another yard, then ... then..."

"You're fibbing, I can see," said Valerik.

"I never tell fibs. Just you follow me," answered Ninochka and she marched boldly out through the gates.

The lads exchanged glances and chuckled.

"Shall we go, Andrei?" Valerik asked his mate.

"Might as well," said Andrei with a shrug of his shoulders.

The lads caught up with Ninochka and fell in behind her. They tried to make as if they weren't actually with her, but were ambling along separately, by themselves. Their faces bore a sardonic expression.

"Flouncing along like a grown-up," said Valerik.

"She'll lose her way," replied Andrei. "And then she'll be a nuisance. We'll have to take her all the way back home."

Ninochka reached the corner of the street and turned left. The lads obediently hurried after her. At the next corner she stopped, stood for a moment uncertainly, then boldly stepped out across the road. The boys, as if in follow-my-leader, filed after her. "Listen," Valerik shouted to Ninochka, "is there much iron there? Maybe it's only an old broken poker?"

"There's a lot," answered Ninochka. "The pair of you won't be able to carry it all."

"Fibber!" said Valerik. "The two of us can carry as much as we want. We're strong."

At that moment Ninochka stopped at the gates. She looked at them very carefully and went into the yard. The lads followed in her steps. They came to the end of the yard, then turned back

towards the gates and once again came out onto the street.

"What are you up to?" asked Valerik suspiciously.

"It's not that yard," said Ninochka in confusion. "I was wrong. We need the short-cut one, and this isn't the short cut. It's the next one, I suppose."

They entered the neighbouring yard, but that too was not the one. The same disappointment awaited them in the next yard as well.

"Now what, are we going to traipse around all the yards in town?" said Andrei crossly.

At last the fourth yard turned out to be the one they wanted. The children walked across it into a narrow lane, then turned onto a wide street and went down it. After a block, Ninochka stopped, looked to all sides and said,

"I think we've come the wrong way."

"Well, let's go the other way since this isn't it. There's no sense standing here," mumbled Andrei.

They turned back and went in the other direction; they passed the lane and once more walked a whole block.

"Now where: right or left?" asked Valerik.

"Right," answered Ninochka. "Or left..."

"Oh heck!" said Andrei. "You're quite useless, aren't you?"

Ninochka began to cry.

"I've lost my way."

"You silly girl," said Valerik reproachfully. "All right, come on, we'll take you home, otherwise you'll be saying we led you astray and abandoned you in the middle of the street."

Valerik took Ninochka's hand and all three of them turned back. Andrei walked behind muttering to himself,

"All that time wasted on that stupid article. Without her we'd have found lots of iron by now."

Now they were back in the yard they had first come through for the short cut. Valerik was about to go through the gates when Ninochka stopped him and said,

"Stop, stop! I remember now. We must go that way."

"Now which is 'that way'?" asked Andrei sarcastically.

"Over there. Through that other yard opposite. I remember now. Grannie and I passed through two yards. First this one, then that one."

"You're not tricking us, are you?" asked Valerik.

"No, I don't think so this time."

"You'd better watch out, if we don't find any iron there, we'll tan your hide for you," said Andrei.

"What's a hide?" asked Ninochka.

"You'll find out soon enough," he said. "Come on."

The children crossed over to the other side of the lane, walked through the yard and ended up on the waste land.

"Here it is, here's the scrap iron," exclaimed Ninochka.

Andrei and Valerik raced each other to the pile of scrap iron. Ninochka scampered after them, shouting joyfully,

"See, see, I told you so. I told the truth, didn't I?"

"Good lass," said Valerik. "You told the truth all right. What's your name?"

"Ninochka. And you?"

"I'm Valerik, he's Andrukha."

"You shouldn't say Andrukha, you should say Andrei," said Ninochka correcting him.

"Oh, he doesn't mind," said Valerik with a wave of his hand.

The lads set about sorting through the rusty pipes and pieces of radiator. The scrap was half covered with earth, so it wasn't that easy to dig it out.

"You're right, there's a lot of scrap here," said Valerik. "How are we going to carry it all?"

"We could bind two pipes together with wire and make a carrier," suggested Andrei.

So the two lads began to make the carrier. Andrei worked hard and kept wiping his nose with the back of his fist.

"You shouldn't wipe your nose like that, Andrei," said Ninochka primly.

"So what? And why not?"

"Grannie says not."

"A fat lot she knows, your Grannie."

"She knows everything because she is the oldest. Here, take this handkerchief instead."

Ninochka took from her pocket a neatly-folded snow-white handkerchief. Andrei took it, stared at it in silence for a moment, then handed it back.

"Take it, or my nose'll spoil it for you."

He took out of his pocket a handkerchief; certainly, it was not so snow-white as Ninochka's. And he had a good blow.

"You see how much better that is," said Ninochka.

"What's better about it!" answered Andrei and made such a face that Ninochka couldn't help laughing.

When the carrier was ready, the children loaded the scrap on it, and just one thick twisted pipe wouldn't fit on.

"Never mind, maybe we will pick it up later on," said Valerik.

"Why later?" asked Ninochka, "I'll give you a hand."

"Fair enough," agreed Andrei. "Come to our school with us, it isn't far. And then we'll take you home."

The lads picked up the carrier and carted the iron to school; in the meantime Ninochka hoisted the twisted pipe onto her shoulder and trailed along behind the boys.

...A whole hour had passed since Grannie had let Ninochka out to play.

"I wonder what my little dragon-fly is up to all that time in

the yard," she asked herself, as she suddenly realised that Ninochka had not yet come home. "I hope she hasn't run off somewhere without me." The old woman flung a scarf over her shoulders and went out into the yard. The yard was now full of children, most of them playing tag.

"Children, have you seen my Ninochka?" she asked.

But the children were so engrossed in their game that they didn't even hear the question. Just at that moment a young boy Vasya rushed past; he was all red from running, the hair on his head was matted and damp.

"You, Vasya, haven't you seen Ninochka?"

"She's not here," said Vasya.

"What, not here?" said Grannie in surprise. "She came out to play over an hour ago."

"Well, she's not here," said a little girl, Svetlana. "We've been playing for ages and we haven't seen her at all. "Children," she shouted, "Ninochka's lost!"

Everyone left off playing at once and crowded round the old woman.

"Perhaps she's gone outside into the street?" said Vasya.

Some of the children rushed into the street and turned back almost at once.

"She's not there," they said.

"She's probably gone to a neighbour," said someone. "You go and ask the neighbours, Grannie."

Grannie went round the neighbours' flats with the children all trailing behind her. After that they began to search in all the barns, clambering up the ladders into the lofts. They even climbed down into the cellar. Ninochka was nowhere to be seen. Grannie followed behind them, muttering to herself,

"Oh, dear, Ninochka You'll be the end of me. Just you wait, I'll give it to you for scaring your Grannie like this!"

"Do you think she might have run into another yard?" said the children. "Let's go and see. You stay here, Grannie. As

soon as we find her, we'll let you know straightaway. Go home and rest."

"How can I rest?" said Grannie in despair.

The old woman sighed sadly and turned back home. As soon as she closed the door a neighbour popped in and asked, "Have they found Ninochka yet?"

"No."

"You'd better report her missing to the police. She might even be there already."

"Yes, yes, you're right," said Grannie. "What an old silly I am, sitting here doing nothing."

And off she went. But she only got as far as the gates where she was met by the children.

"We've hunted in all the yards on this side of the street," they shouted. "Now we'll try all along the other side. Don't you worry yourself, we'll find her."

"Carry on looking, dear children. And thank you," said the old woman. "Thank you very much. Oh dearie me, what an old fool I am... I won't punish her. I won't say a word to her ... if only they find her."

"Where are you off to, Grannie?" asked the children.

"To the police station, children, the police station."

She moved off along the street searching every nook and cranny as she went. Finally she made it to the local police station and sought out the children's room. The duty officer stood facing her.

"Sonny, you don't have my little girl here, do you?" she asked hopefully. "I've lost my granddaughter."

"We haven't had any lost children handed in today," replied the officer. "Now don't you worry, lady. Your little girl will turn up." He sat the old woman down on a chair and opened a big thick ledger lying on the desk.

"How old is your girl?" he asked and began writing. "What's her name? Where does she live?"

He wrote it all down: first name, surname, address. He even wrote that Ninochka was dressed in a light blue dress with a white apron which had a red rabbit on it. Then he asked whether there was a phone at home, and he noted down the number.

"So that's it, lady," he said at last. "Just you go home and don't fret. Your Ninochka may well be waiting for you at home right this minute. And if she isn't we'll find her soon enough."

The old woman had calmed down somewhat before she set out for home. But the nearer she got to the house, the more her alarm grew. When she reached the gates, she halted. And Vasya came running up. The hair on his head was even more matted than before, and droplets of sweat glistened on his face.

"Ninochka's Mummie's home," he announced with a scared look.

"And Ninochka?"

"They haven't found her yet."

Grannie slumped against the fence; her knees went weak. She didn't know how to tell Ninochka's mother about the loss. She was on the point of asking Vasya something else when suddenly she saw two boys coming along the pavement. They were hurrying down the street and between them, her little legs scurrying fast, was a young girl. Both boys held her by the hand, and now and again she would pull up her legs and hang by her hands; she was obviously having a good time. All three of them were laughing. When they came quite close, the old woman recognised the white apron with its red rabbit over the light blue dress.

"It's Ninochka!" she shouted. "Thank Goodness!"

"Grannie!" cried Ninochka rushing to her.

The old woman took Ninochka in her arms and began to kiss her, while Andrei and Valerik stood there looking at them.

"Thank you, boys. Where did you find her?" she asked.

"Who?" asked Valerik bemused.

"Ninochka of course."

"Oh, Ninochka! Listen, Andrei, do you remember where we found Ninochka?"

Andrei wiped his nose with the back of his hand, glanced around and said,

"Where? Well, it was here, wasn't it? In this very yard. We found her right here, before we went off for the scrap."

"Well, many thanks, lad. Thank you very much indeed," said the old woman.

She let Ninochka down to the ground and, clutching her hand tightly, she led her home. In the hallway they were met by Ninochka's mother who was in the middle of putting on her hat. Her face was clearly troubled.

"What on earth's going on here?" she asked. "The police have just been on the phone asking whether Ninochka's back or not. Where has she been?"

"Never mind, never mind," said Grannie soothingly. "Ninochka got herself lost, and has been found again."

"Oh, no, Grannie, I didn't get lost at all," said Ninochka. "I went to show the boys where the scrap was."

"What scrap are you talking about?"

And Ninochka began to tell them about her adventures. Grannie only sighed as she heard the story.

"Well I never, what these children think of!" she said. "What they need scrap iron for goodness only knows."

"Well, Grannie," said Ninochka, "you said yourself that children should help grown-ups. Daddie helped too when he was a boy. So I want to help as well."

"You did well to help the Pioneers," said Ninochka's mother. "But you should have asked Grannie first. Grannie was worried."

"You aren't at all sorry for your Grannie," said the old woman shaking her head.

"I am sorry, Grannie," said Ninochka. "I shall always ask in

future. And you and I will find more scrap somewhere, won't we? A lot of scrap iron."

For the rest of the day they heard nothing but talk of scrap iron. And in the evening they all sat down round the table. Grannie and Mother wrote Father a letter. And Ninochka drew a picture. She drew a little snow-covered Arctic cluster of dwellings on the bank of a frozen river. The inhabitants were gathered on a hill waiting for a plane which could be seen far off in the sky. It was bringing people the things they needed: sugar to one, flour to someone else, medicine for another, and toys for the children. At the bottom Ninochka drew herself with a thick iron pipe in her hands and wrote in large capitals:

"AND I'M HELPING TOO."

"That's lovely," said Grannie happily. "We'll send this drawing in Daddie's letter, and Daddie will know what a good little girl he's got."

Putty*

The glazier came round one day to putty the window frames for the cold winter. Kostya and Shurik stood watching him finish the job. When he had gone, they prised out the putty from the windows and began to model animals from it. The trouble was the animals did not come out right. Then Kostya did a snake and said to Shurik,

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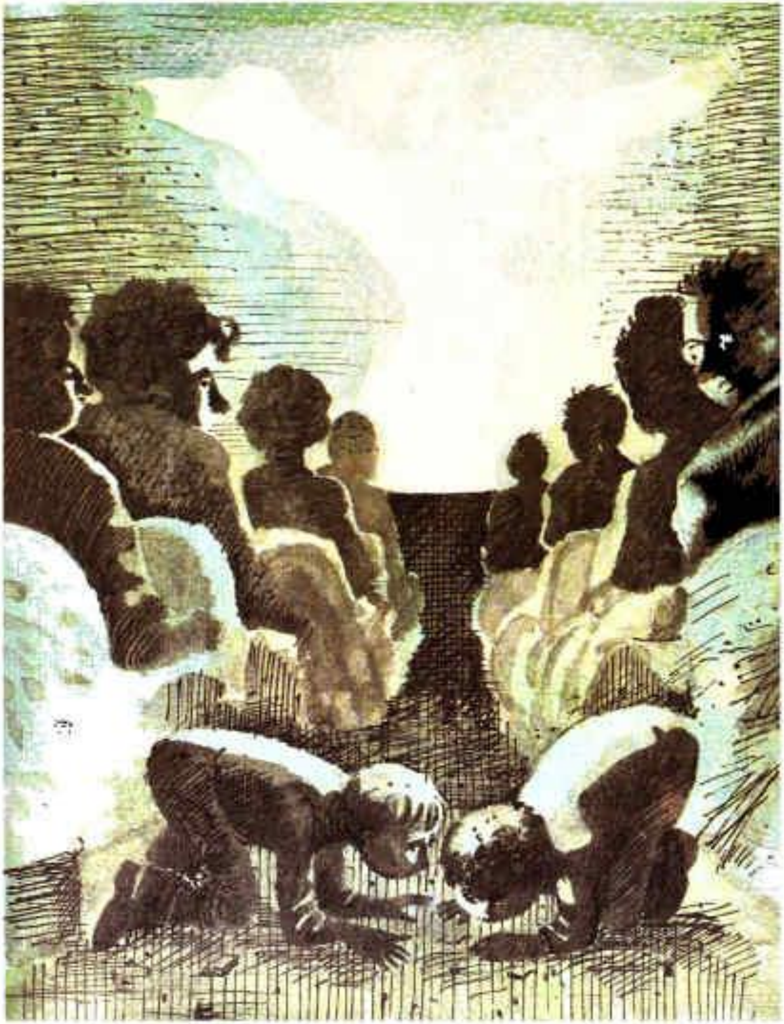


"Mine's horrible. It's all gooey. Probably melted in my pocket."

"Where's the putty?"

"It's here, in my pocket... Just a minute! This isn't putty, it's my peppermint bar. Ugh! I must have mixed them up in the dark. Oo-erh! No wonder it didn't taste very nice."

In his disgust, Kostya threw the putty onto the floor.

"Why did you throw it away?" asked Shurik.

"What do I want it for now?"

"Maybe you don't, but I might," hissed Shurik and crawled under the seat in search of the putty.

"Where is it?" he said, beginning to get angry. "How can I find anything in the dark?"

"All right, I'll find it," said Kostya getting down on the floor to look under the seats.

"Ouch!" suddenly came a voice from down below. "I say, mister, get off!"

"Who's that?"

"It's me."

"Who's me?"

"Me, Kostya. Get off me."

"But I'm not on you."

"Yes you are, you're treading on my hand."

"Serves you right for crawling under the seat."

"I was looking for my putty."

Kostya crawled under the seat and suddenly found himself nose to nose with Shurik.

"Who's that?" he said in a frightened voice.

"It's me, Shurik."

"Well, this is me, Kostya."

"Found it?"

"I haven't found anything."

"Neither have I."

"Maybe we'd better watch the rest of the film, otherwise

we'll scare the living daylights out of the audience; they'll think dogs are poking their noses round their legs."

Kostya and Shurik crawled back under the seats and sat down finally—just in time to see the word "END" flash up on the screen.

The patrons all crushed towards the exit. The two boys followed them into the street.

"What sort of film were we watching?" asked Kostya. "I couldn't make head or tail of it."

"You don't think I understood it, do you?" answered Shurik. "What a load of rubbish. Fancy showing films like that!"

Mishka's Porridge

Last summer when I was living in the country with my mother, Mishka came to stay with us. I was very pleased to see him because I had been quite lonely without him. Mum was pleased to see him too.

"I'm so glad you've come," she said. "You two boys can keep each other company. I have to go to town early tomorrow, and I don't know when I'll be back. Do you think you can manage here by yourselves for two days?"

"Of course we can," I said. "We aren't babies."

"You'll have to make your own breakfast. Do you know how to cook porridge?"

"I do," said Mishka. "It's easy as anything."

"Mishka," I said, "are you quite sure you know? When did you ever cook porridge?"

"Don't worry. I've seen Mum cook it. You leave it to me. I won't let you starve. I'll make you the best porridge you've ever tasted."

In the morning Mum left us a supply of bread and some jam for our tea and showed us where the oatmeal was. She told us how to cook it too, but I didn't bother to listen. Why should I bother if Mishka knows all about it, I thought.

Then Mum went away and Mishka and I decided to go down to the river to fish. We got out our fishing-tackle and dug up some worms.

"Just a minute," I said. "Who's going to cook the porridge if we go down to the river?"

"Who wants to bother with cooking?" said Mishka. "It's too much trouble. We can eat bread and jam instead. There's plenty of bread. We'll cook the porridge later on when we get hungry."

We made a lot of jam sandwiches and went off to the river. We went swimming and lay on the sandy beach afterwards drying ourselves and eating our sandwiches. Then we fished. We sat for a long time but the fish wouldn't bite. All we got was a dozen or so gudgeons, teeny-weeny ones. We spent most of the day down at the river. Late in the afternoon we got terribly hungry and hurried home to get something to eat.

"Now then, Mishka," I said. "You're the expert. What shall we make? Something that won't take long to cook. I'm awfully hungry."

"Let's make some porridge," said Mishka. "It's the easiest."

"All right," I said.

We lit the stove. Mishka got the meal and pot.

"See you make plenty while you're at it. I could eat a horse."

He nearly filled the pot up with meal and poured in water up to the brim.

"Isn't that too much water?" I said.

"No, that's the way Mother makes it. You look after the stove and leave the porridge to me."

So I kept the fire going while Mishka cooked the porridge, which means that he sat and watched the pot, because the porridge cooked by itself.

Before long it got quite dark, and we had to light the lamp. The porridge went on cooking. Suddenly I looked up and saw the pot lid rising and the porridge spilling out over the side.

"Hey, Mishka," I said. "What's the matter with the porridge?"

"Why, what's wrong with it?"

"It's climbing right out of the pot!"

Mishka grabbed a spoon and began pushing the porridge back into the pot. He pushed and pushed, but it kept swelling up and spilling over the side.

"I don't know what's happened to it. Perhaps it's ready?"

I took a spoon and tasted a little, but the meal was still hard and dry.

"Where's all the water gone?"

"I don't know," said Mishka. "I put an awful lot in. Perhaps there's a hole in the pot?"

We looked all over the pot but there wasn't any sign of a hole.

"Must have evaporated," he said. "We'll have to add some more."

He took some of the porridge out of the pot and put it on a plate; he had to take out quite a bit to make room for the water. Then we put the pot back on the stove and let it cook some more. It cooked and cooked and after a while it began spilling over the side again.

"Hey, what's this!" cried Mishka. "Why won't it stay in the pot?"

He snatched up his spoon and scooped out some more porridge and added another cup of water.

"Look at that," he said. "You thought there was too much water."

The porridge went on cooking.

And would you believe it, in a little while it lifted the lid and came crawling out again!

I said: "You must have put too much meal in. That's what it is. It swells when it cooks and there's not enough room in the pot for it."

"Yes, that must be it," said Mishka. "It's all your fault. You told me to put a lot in because you were hungry, remember?"

"How do I know how much to put in? You're the one who's supposed to know how to cook."

"So I do. I'd have it cooked by now if you hadn't interfered."

"All right, cook away, I shan't say another word."

I went off in a huff and Mishka went on cooking the porridge, that is, he kept scooping out the extra porridge and adding water. Soon the whole table was covered with plates of half-cooked porridge. And he added water each time.

Finally I lost patience.

"You're not doing it right. This way the porridge won't be ready till morning."

"Well, that's how they do it in big restaurants. Didn't you know that? They always cook dinner the night before so it should be ready by morning."

"That's all right for restaurants. They don't need to hurry because they have heaps of other food."

"We don't need to hurry either."

"Don't we?! I'm starving. And besides it's time to go to bed. See how late it is."

"You'll have plenty of time to sleep," he said, throwing another glass of water into the pot. Suddenly it dawned on me what was wrong.

"Of course it won't cook if you keep adding cold water," I said.

"You think you can cook porridge without water?"

"No, I think you've still got too much meal in that pot."

I took the pot, spilled out half the meal and told him to fill it with water.

He took the mug and went to the pail.

"Dash it," he said. "The water's all gone."

"What shall we do now? It's pitch dark, we'll never be able to find the well."

"Rats, I'll bring some in a jiffy."

He took matches, tied a rope round the handle of the pail and went off to the well. In a few minutes he was back.

"Where's the water?" I asked him.

"Water? Out there in the well."

"Don't be silly. What've you done with the pail?"

"The pail? That's in the well too."

"In the well?"

"That's right."

"You mean you dropped it?"

"That's right."

"Oh, you silly ass! We'll starve to death this way. How are we going to get water now?"

"We can use the kettle."

I took the kettle. "Give me the rope."

"I haven't got it."

"Where is it?"

"Down there."

"Down where?"

"In the well."

"So you dropped the pail along with the rope?"

"That's right."

We started hunting for another piece of rope, but we couldn't find any.

"Never mind. I'll go and ask the neighbours," said Mishka.

"You can't," I said. "Look at the time. Everyone's gone to bed long ago."

As luck would have it, both of us felt awfully thirsty. We were simply dying for a drink.

Mishka said: "It's always like that. When there's no water you always feel thirsty. That's why people always get thirsty in the desert—because there's no water there!"

"Never mind about deserts," I said. "You go and find some rope."

"Where shall I find it? I've looked everywhere. Let's use the fishing-line."

"Is it strong enough?"

"I think so."

"What if it isn't?"

"If it isn't, it'll break."

We unwound the fishing-line, tied it to the kettle and went out to the well. I lowered the kettle into the well and filled it with water. The line was as taut as a violin string.

"It's going to snap," I said. "You'll see."

"Perhaps it'll hold if we lift it very, very carefully," said Mishka.

I raised it as carefully as I could. I had just got it above the water when there was a splash, and the kettle was gone.

"Did it break?" asked Mishka.

"Of course it did. How are we going to get water now?"

"Let's try the samovar," said Mishka.

"No. We might as well throw the samovar straight into the well. Less trouble. Besides, we haven't any more rope."

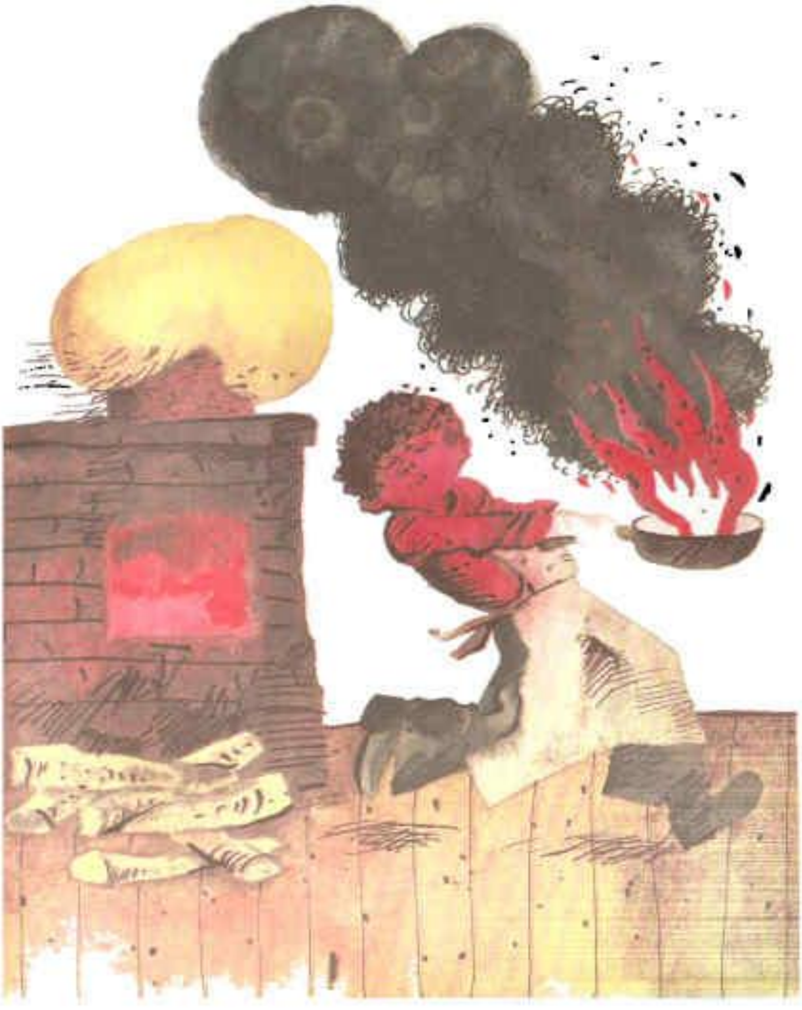
"All right then, use the pot."

"We haven't so many pots to throw away," I said.

"Well, then, try a tumbler."

"Do you want to spend the rest of the night scooping up water by the tumblerful?"

"But what are we going to do? We've got to finish cooking the porridge. Besides, I'm trerribly thirsty."



"Let's try the tin mug," I said. "It's a little bigger than a tumbler anyway."

We went back to the house, tied the fishing-line to the mug so that it wouldn't overturn and went back to the well. After we had drunk our fill of water Mishka said:

"It's always like that—when you're thirsty you think you could drink up the sea, but when you begin drinking you find one mugful is plenty. That's because people are naturally greedy."

"Stop jabbering and bring the pot out here. We can fill it with water straight from the well. It will save us running back and forth a dozen times."

Mishka brought the pot and stood it right at the edge of the well. I very nearly knocked it off with my elbow.

"Silly ass," I said. "What's the idea of putting it right under my elbow? Hold on to it and keep as far from the well as you can, or you'll send it flying into the water."

Mishka took the pot and moved away from the well. I filled it up and we went back to the house. By this time our porridge was quite cold and the fire had gone out. We got it going again and put the pot back on the stove to cook. After a long time it started to boil, thickened gradually and made plopping noises.

"Hear that?" said Mishka. "We're going to have some wonderful porridge soon."

I took a little on a spoon and tasted it. It was awful! It had a nasty bitter burnt taste, and we had forgotten to salt it. Mishka tasted it too and spat it out at once.

"No," he said. "I'd rather die of hunger than eat such stuff."

"You would certainly die if you did eat it," I said.

"But what shall we do?"

"I don't know."

"Donkeys!" cried Mishka. "We've forgotten the fish."

"We're not going to start bothering with fish at this time of night. It will be morning soon."

"We won't boil them, we'll fry them. They'll be ready in a minute, you'll see."

"Oh, all right," I said. "But if it's going to take as long as the porridge, count me out."

"It'll be ready in five minutes, you'll see."

Mishka cleaned the fish and put them on the frying-pan. The pan got hot and the fish stuck to the bottom. He tried to pull them off and made quite a mess of them.

I said: "Whoever tried frying fish without butter?"

Mishka got a bottle of vegetable oil and poured some on to the pan and put it into the stove straight on the coals so it should cook faster. The oil spluttered and crackled and suddenly it caught fire. Mishka snatched up the frying-pan and I wanted to pour water on it, but there wasn't a drop of water in the house, so it burned and burned until all the oil had burned out. The room was full of smoke and all that was left of the fish were a few burned coals.

"Well," said Mishka, "what are we going to fry now?"

"No more frying. Besides spoiling good food you're liable to burn the house down. You've done enough cooking for one day!"

"But what shall we eat?"

We tried chewing raw meal, but it wasn't much fun. We tried a raw onion, but it was bitter. We tried vegetable oil and nearly made ourselves sick. Finally we found the jam pot, licked it clean and went to bed. It was very late by then.

We woke up in the morning as hungry as wolves. Mishka wanted to cook some porridge, but when I saw him get out the meal I got cold all over.

"Don't you dare," I said. "I'll go to Aunt Natasha, our landlady, and ask her to cook some porridge for us."

We went to Aunt Natasha and told her all about it and promised to weed her garden for her if she would cook some porridge for us. She took pity on us and gave us some milk and

cabbage pie while she cooked our porridge. And we ate and ate as if we couldn't stop. Aunt Natasha's little boy Vovka stood watching with his eyes popping out.

At last we had had enough. Aunt Natasha gave us a hook and some rope and we went to fish the pail and the kettle out of the well. It took us a long time before we finally managed to pull them up. But luckily nothing got lost. After that, Mishka and I and little Vovka weeded Aunt Natasha's garden.

Mishka said: "Weeding is nothing. Anybody can do it. It's easy. Much easier than cooking porridge, anyway."

The Telephone

One day Mishka and I saw a wonderful toy in a shop. It was a telephone set that worked just like a real one. There were two telephones and a coil of wire all packed neatly in a big wooden box. The salesgirl told us that you could use it between flats in the same house. You put one phone in one flat and the other in the flat next door and connect them with the wire.

Now, Mishka and I live in the same house, my flat is one floor above his, and we thought it would be great fun to be able to call each other up whenever we wanted to.

"Besides," said Mishka, "it's not an ordinary toy that gets broken and thrown out. It's a useful thing."

"Yes," I said. "Very useful. You can have a talk with your neighbour without going anywhere."

"Wonderful," said Mishka, all excited. "You can sit home and talk as much as you wish."

We decided to save up money to buy the telephones. For two weeks we didn't eat any ice-cream and we didn't go to the pictures, and by the end of two weeks we had enough money.

We hurried home from the shop with the box, put one of the telephones in my flat and the other in Mishka's and ran the wire through my window to Mishka's room.

"Now then," said Mishka. "Let's try it out. You run upstairs and wait for my call."

I dashed up to my place, picked up the receiver, and there was Mishka's voice already shouting:

"Hallo! Hallo!"

I yelled back "Hallo" at the top of my voice.

"Can you hear me?" shouted Mishka.

"Yes, I can hear you. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you. Isn't it wonderful! Do you hear me well?"

"Fine. What about you?"

"Me too. Ha! Ha! Do you hear me laughing?"

"Of course. Ha! Ha! Ha! Can you hear that?"

"Yes. Now listen, I'm coming up to you right away."

He came running in to my place and we hugged each other with joy.

"Aren't you glad we have a phone? Isn't it grand?"

"Yes," I said.

"Now, I'll go back and call you up again."

He ran back. The phone rang again. I picked up the receiver.

"Hallo!"

"Hallo!"

"Do you hear me?"

"I hear you perfectly."

"Do you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Me too. Now let's have a talk."

"Yes, let's. What shall we talk about?"

"Oh, all sorts of things. Are you glad we bought the telephone?"

"Very glad."

"It would be awful if we hadn't bought it, wouldn't it?"

"Terrible."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Why don't you say something?"

"Say something yourself."

"I don't know what to say," said Mishka. "It's always like that. When you need to talk you don't know what to say, but when you know you mustn't talk you can't stop."

I said:

"I know what: I'll hang up and think for a while, and when I think of something to say I'll call you."

"All right."

I hung up and started to think. Suddenly the phone rang. I picked up the receiver.

"Well, have you thought of something?" asked Mishka.

"Not yet, have you?"

"No, I haven't."

"Then what did you ring up for?"

"I thought you had thought of something."

"I would have phoned if I had."

"I thought you mightn't think of it."

"Think I'm a donkey or what?"

"Did I say you're a donkey?"

"What did you say then?"

"Nothing, I said you were not a donkey."

"Oh, all right, that's enough about donkeys. We'd better do our lessons."

"Yes, so we had."

I hung up and sat down to do my lessons. I had just opened the book when the phone rang.

"Listen. I'm going to sing and play the piano over the phone."

"Go ahead."

I heard a crackling noise, then the thumping of a piano and suddenly a voice that did not sound a bit like Mishka's sang:

Whither have you fled,
Golden days of my youth?..

What's this, I wondered. Where could Mishka have learned to sing like that?

Just then Mishka came in, grinning from ear to ear.

"You thought it was me singing? It's the gramophone! Let me listen too."

I handed him the

receiver. He listened for a while, then suddenly he dropped the receiver in a great hurry and dashed downstairs. I put the receiver to my ear and heard an awful buzzing and hissing.

The record must have run down.

I sat down again to do my lessons. The telephone rang. I took off the receiver.

"Bow-wow!" sounded in my ear.

"What're you barking for?"

"It's not me, it's Laddy. Can you hear him biting at the receiver?"

"Yes."

"I'm pushing the receiver against his nose and he's gnawing at it."

"He'll chew up your telephone if you're not careful."

"Oh, nothing will happen to it, it's made of iron. Ouch! You bad dog, get down! How dare you bite me! Take that! (Bow-wow!). He bit me, did you hear that?"

"Yes, I heard," I said.

I sat down again to do my lessons, but the next minute the telephone rang again. This time there was a loud buzzing in the receiver.

"What's that?"

"A fly."

"Where is it?"

"I'm holding it in front of the receiver and it's buzzing and whirring its wings."

Mishka and I telephoned to each other all day long. We invented all sorts of tricks: we sang, we shouted, we roared, we miaowed, we whispered—and you could hear everything. It was pretty late before I finally finished my lessons. I decided to call up Mishka before going to bed.

I rang up but there was no answer.

What could have happened, I wondered. Had his telephone stopped working already?

I called again, but there was no answer. I ran downstairs and, would you believe it, there was Mishka taking his telephone to pieces! He had pulled out the battery, taken the bell apart and was beginning to unscrew the receiver.

"Here!" I said. "What are you busting the telephone for?"

"I'm not. I'm only taking it apart to see how it's made. I'll put it together again."

"You won't be able to. You don't know how."

"Who says I don't? It's easy."

He unscrewed the receiver, took out some bits of metal and started to pry open a round metal plate inside. The plate flew off and some black powder spilt out. Mishka got frightened and tried to put the powder back into the receiver.

"Now you've gone and done it!" I said.

"That's nothing. I'll put it together again in a jiffy!"

He worked and worked but it wasn't as easy as he thought, because the screws were very tiny and it was hard to get them into place. At last he had everything put back except a small piece of metal and two screws.

"What's that thing for?" I asked him.

"Oh dear, I forgot to put it in," says Mishka. "How silly of me! It should have been screwed inside. I'll have to take it apart again."

"All right," I said. "I'm going home. Call me up when you've finished."

I went home and waited. I waited and waited but there was no call, so I went to bed.

Next morning the telephone rang so loudly that I thought the house was on fire. I sprang out of bed, snatched up the receiver and yelled:

"Hallo!"

"What are you grunting like that for?" said Mishka.

"I'm not grunting."

"Stop grunting and talk properly!" shouted Mishka.

"But I am talking properly. Why should I grunt anyway?"

"Don't be a clown. I won't believe you've got a pig there anyway."

"But there isn't any pig here. I'm telling you!" I shouted, getting angry too.

Mishka said nothing.

A minute later he burst into my room.

"What do you mean by making pig noises over the phone?"

"I wasn't doing anything of the kind."

"I heard you quite plainly."

"What should I want to make pig noises for?"

"How do I know? All I know is there was someone grunting into my ear. You go downstairs and try it yourself."

I went down to his place, rang him up and shouted:

"Hallo!"

"Grunt, grunt, grunt, grunt!" was all I heard in reply.

I saw what had happened and I ran back to tell Mishka.

"It's all your doing," I said. "You're gone and busted the telephone."

"How's that?"

"You spoiled something in the receiver when you took it apart."

"I must have put it back the wrong way," said Mishka. "I'll have to fix it."

"How will you fix it?"

"I'll take yours apart and see how it's made."

"Oh no, you won't! I'm not going to let you ruin my telephone too."

"You needn't be afraid. I'll be very careful. If I don't mend it we won't be able to use the phone at all."

I had to give in and he got busy at once. He tinkered with it for a long time and when he had finished "fixing" it, it stopped working altogether. It didn't even grunt any more.

"What are we going to do now?" I said.

"I'll tell you what," said Mishka. "Let's go back to the shop and ask them to repair it for us."

We went to the shop, but they said they didn't repair telephones and they couldn't tell us where we could get ours repaired. We felt pretty miserable all that day. Then Mishka had an idea.

"We are donkeys! We can telegraph to each other."

"How?"

"You know, dots and dashes. The bell still works. We can use that. A short bell can be a dot, and a long bell will be a dash. We can learn the Morse code and send messages to each other."

We got hold of the Morse code and started studying it. A dot and a dash stands for A, a dash and three dots for B, a dot and two dashes for C, and so on. We soon learned the whole alphabet and began sending messages. It went pretty slowly at first, but after a while we were tapping away on our bell like real telegraphers. It was even more exciting than a telephone.

But it didn't last long. One morning I called Mishka, but there was no answer. He must be sleeping, I thought. So I called later, but there was still no answer. I went down to him and knocked at his door. Mishka opened it for me.

"You don't need to knock any more. You can ring."

He pointed to the button on the door.

"What't that?"

"A bell."

"Go on!"

"Yes, an electric door-bell."

"Where did you get it?"

"I made it myself."

"How?"

"I made it out of the telephone."

"What?"

"Yes. I took the bell out of the phone, and the button as well. I took the battery out too. Got something useful now instead of just a toy."

"But you had no right to take the telephone apart," I said.

"Why not? I took mine apart, not yours."

"Yes, but the telephone belongs to both of us. If I had known you were going to take it to pieces I wouldn't have chipped in with you and bought it. I don't need a telephone that doesn't work."

"You don't need a telephone at all. We don't live so far from each other. If you want to talk to me you can come downstairs."

"I never want to talk to you again," I said and walked out.

I was so angry with him I didn't talk to him for three whole days. I was very lonely all by myself, so I took my telephone apart and made a door-bell out of it too. But I didn't do it the way Mishka did. I made mine properly. I put the battery on a shelf near the door and ran a wire from it along the wall to the bell and the button. I screwed the push-button in properly so it 10

didn't hang on one nail like Mishka's. Even Mum and Dad praised me for doing such a neat job.

I went down to tell Mishka about my bell.

I pressed the button on his door, but nobody answered.

I pressed it several times but I didn't hear it ring. So I knocked.

Mishka opened the door.

"What's wrong with your bell? Doesn't it work?"

"No, it's out of order."

"What's the trouble?"

"I took the battery apart."

"You what?!"

"Yes, I wanted to see what it was made of."

"Well, what are you going to do now without a telephone or a bell?" I asked him.

"Oh, I'll manage somehow," he answered with a sigh.

I went home feeling puzzled. What makes Mishka do such things? Why does he have to break everything? I even felt quite sorry for him.

That night I couldn't

for a long time, I was thinking about our telephone and the bell we had made out of it. Then I thought about electricity and where the electricity inside the batteries came from.

Everyone else was fast asleep but I lay awake thinking about all these things. After a while I got up, switched on the light, took my battery off the shelf and broke it open. There was some sort of liquid inside with a small black stick wrapped in a piece of cloth dipped in it. So that was it! The electricity came from that liquid. I went back to bed and fell asleep at once.

JOLLY FAMILY

Important Decision

This happened when the steam-engine, which Mishka and I had tried to make out of a tin can, blew up. Mishka let the water in the can get too hot and it burst and the steam burnt his hand. Lucky for him his mother smeared some naphtha ointment on it right away. That's a wonderful remedy. Try

it yourself if you don't believe me. But be sure to rub it on as soon as you burn yourself, or else the skin will come off.

Well, after our steam-engine blew up, Mishka's mother wouldn't let us play with it any more and threw it into the dust-bin. For a while we couldn't think of anything to do and it was awfully dull.

Spring was beginning. The snow was melting everywhere. The water ran in little streams in the gutters. The bright spring sun shone in through the windows. But Mishka and I were in the dumps. We are a funny pair—we aren't happy unless we've got something to do. And when we haven't anything to do we sit around and mope and mope until we find something.

One day I came to see Mishka and found him sitting at the table poring over a book, with his head in his hands. He was so busy reading he didn't hear me come in. I had to bang the door hard before he looked up.

"Oh, it's you, Nikoladze," he said with a broad grin. Mishka never calls me by my real name. Instead of calling me Kolya like everyone else, he invents all sorts of queer names for me such as Nikola, Mikola, Mikula Selyaninovich, or Miklukho-Maklai, and once he even called me Nikolaki. Every day I have to answer to a new name. But I don't mind so long as he likes it.

"Yes," I said, "it's me. What's that book you've got there?"

"A very interesting book," said Mishka. "I bought it this morning at a news-stand."

I glanced at it. The title was *Poultry Farming*. There was a picture of a hen and a cock on the cover, and on every page there were diagrams and drawings and pictures of chicken coops.

"What's interesting about it?" I said. "Looks to me like a scientific book of some kind."

"That's what makes it interesting. This isn't one of your silly fairy-tales. Everything in here is true. It's a useful book, that's what it is."

Mishka is the kind of chap who insists on everything being useful. Whenever he has a little pocket money he goes and buys something useful like this book. Once he bought a book called *Chebyshev's Inverse Trigonometric Functions and Polynomes*. Of course he couldn't understand a word, so he decided to put it away until he was clever enough to read it. It's been lying on the shelf ever since, waiting for Mishka to get clever.

He marked the page he was reading and closed the book.

"You can learn all sorts of things from this book," he said. "How to raise chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys, everything."

"You're not thinking of raising turkeys by any chance?"

"No, but I like to read about it just the same. It turns out you can make a machine called an incubator that hatches chickens all by itself without any hen."

"Ha!" I said. "Everybody knows that. What's more, I saw one last year, when I was on the farm, with Mother. It hatched five hundred or even a thousand chicks a day. They hardly had time to take them out."

"Really!" said Mishka all excited. "I never knew about that. I thought only brood-hens could hatch chicks. I used to see lots of sitting-hens when we lived in the country."

"Oh, I've seen plenty of them myself," I said. "But an incubator is much better. A hen can only hatch a dozen eggs at a time, but an incubator can take a thousand at a time."

"I know," said Mishka. "That's what it says in the book. And here's another thing. A hen doesn't lay eggs when she's hatching her chicks and bringing them up, but if you have an incubator to hatch the chicks the hen can go on laying eggs."

We set to work to figure out how many more eggs there would be if all the hens laid eggs instead of hatching chickens. It takes twenty-one days for a brood-hen to hatch chickens, and if you count the time she spends looking after them when they're hatched you find that it takes about three months before she starts laying again.

"Three months, that's ninety days," said Mishka. "If the hen wasn't busy hatching chickens she could lay ninety eggs more a year, even if she only laid one egg a day. For a small farm with even ten hens that would make nine hundred eggs a year. And if you take some big collective or state farm with a thousand hens, you'd have ninety thousand extra eggs. Think of it! Ninety thousand eggs!"

We spent quite a long time discussing the usefulness of incubators.

Then Mishka said:

"I say, let's make a small incubator of our own and hatch a few eggs."

"How could we do that?" I asked. "I'm sure it isn't an easy thing to make."

"I don't think it's so hard," said Mishka. "The book tells you all about it. The main thing is to keep the eggs warm for twenty-one days running and then the chickens will hatch out by themselves."

Now, the thought of having little chicks of our own appealed to me tremendously. I am very fond of all kinds of birds and animals. Mishka and I joined the Young Naturalists' circle at school last autumn and worked a little with our pets, but then Mishka got the idea of making a steam-engine and so we stopped going to the circle. Vitya Smirnov, the monitor of the circle, told us he would cross us off the list of members if we

didn't do any work, but we begged him to give us another chance.

Mishka tried to imagine how nice it would be when our chicks hatched out.

"They'll be such sweet little things," he said. "We can fix up a corner for them in the kitchen and they can live there and we'll feed them and take care of them."

"Yes, but we'll have plenty to do before that. Don't forget it takes three weeks for them to hatch out!" I said.

"What about it? All we have to do is to make the incubator, the chicks hatch out by themselves."

I thought it over for a while. Mishka looked at me anxiously. I saw that he was itching to get to work at once.

"All right," I said. "We haven't anything else to do anyhow. Let's have a shot at it."

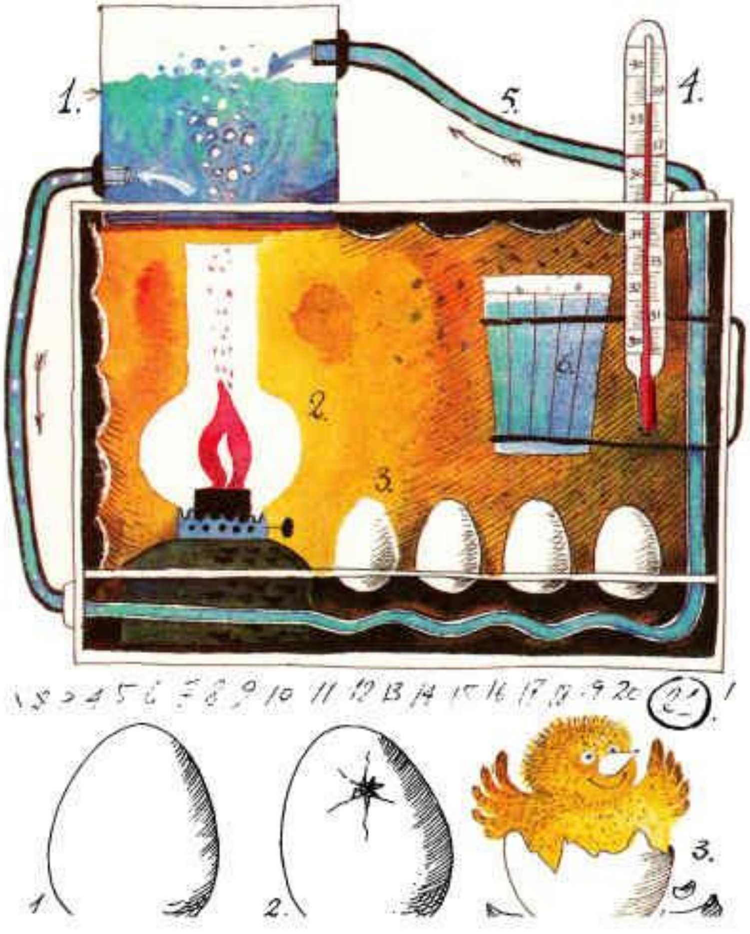
"I knew you would agree!" Mishka cried joyfully. "I would have tackled it myself, but it wouldn't be half as much fun without you."

Unexpected Hitch

"Perhaps we don't need to make an incubator. Let's just put the eggs in a saucepan and stand it on the stove," I proposed.

"Oh no, that would be no good at all," Mishka cried. The fire would go out and the eggs would be spoiled. The thing about an incubator is that it keeps an even temperature all the time—102 degrees."

"Why 102 degrees?"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"Because that's the temperature of the brood-hen when she's sitting on her eggs."

"You mean to say hens have temperatures? I thought only human beings had temperatures when they were ill."

"Everybody has a temperature, silly, whether they're ill or not. Only when you're ill your temperature goes up."

Mishka opened the book and pointed to a drawing.

"See, that's what an incubator looks like. This is a tank for the water, and this little pipe here leads from the tank to the box where the eggs are. The tank is heated from underneath. The warm water runs through the pipe and heats the eggs. Look, there's thermometer so you can keep watch on the temperature."

"Where are we going to get a tank from?"

"We don't need a tank. We can use an empty tin instead. We're only going to have a little incubator."

"How are we going to heat it?" I asked.

"With an ordinary paraffin lamp. There's an old one lying in the shed somewhere."

We went to the shed and began rummaging among the rubbish piled up in the corner. There were old boots, galoshes, a broken umbrella, a good piece of copper tubing, any amount of bottles and empty tin cans. We had gone through nearly the whole pile before I happened to notice the lamp standing on a shelf. Mishka climbed up and took it down. It was covered with dust, but the glass was whole and to our great joy there was even a wick inside. We took the lamp, the copper tube and a good-sized tin and carried them all to the kitchen.

First Mishka cleaned the lamp, filled it with paraffin and lit it to see how it worked. It burned quite well and you could turn the wick up and down to make the flame bigger or smaller as you pleased. We blew out the lamp and set to work on the incubator.

To begin with, we made a large box out of plywood, big

enough to hold about fifteen eggs. We lined it with cotton wool covered with a layer of felt to keep the eggs nice and warm. Then we made a lid for the box with an opening in it for the thermometer so we could watch the temperature. The next thing was to make a heater. We took the tin can and drilled two round holes in it, one on top and the other below. We soldered the tube to the upper hole, made an opening in the side of the incubator box and stuck the tube inside, bending it so as to pass the free end out again and solder it to the hole in the bottom of the can. The bent tube made a sort of radiator inside the box.

Now the lamp had to be placed so it would heat the tin can. Mishka fetched a plywood crate. We stood it up on end, cut a round hole on top and put the incubator on it so that the tin was right on top of the hole. The lamp went underneath.

At last everything was ready. We filled the tin with water and lit the lamp. The water in the tin and the tube began to get warm. The mercury in the thermometer started to rise and before long it reached 102 degrees. It would have gone up still more if Mishka's mother had not come in just then.

"What are you two up to now? The whole place smells of paraffin!" she said.

"It's the incubator," Mishka said.

"What incubator?"

"You know, the kind that hatches chickens."

"Chickens? Whatever are you talking about?"

"Look, Mum, I'll show you how it's done. You put the eggs in here and this lamp here..."

"What's the lamp for?"

"To heat it with. You simply must have a lamp, otherwise it won't work."

"Nonsense, I'm not going to let you play with paraffin lamps. You'll upset it and the paraffin will catch fire. No, no, I can't have it!"

"Please, Mum. We'll be very careful."

"No. I shan't let you play with lighted lamps. What next! First you go and scald yourself with boiling water and now you want to burn the house down!"

Mishka begged and pleaded with his mother, but it was no use.

Mishka was terribly upset. "Bang goes our incubator!" he said.

We Find a Way Out

That night I couldn't sleep for a long time. I lay awake for a whole hour thinking about our incubator. At first I thought of asking my mother to let us use the paraffin lamp, but I soon saw that was no good because she is terribly afraid of fire and is always hiding the matches from me. What's more, Mishka's mother had taken the lamp away and wouldn't give it back to us for anything.

Everyone in the house was fast asleep, but I lay there racking my brains. And suddenly a wonderful idea came into my head: why not try using an electric lamp to heat the water?

I got up quietly, switched on the desk lamp and tried it with my finger to see whether it was getting hot. It warmed up quickly and was soon so hot I couldn't keep my finger on it. I took the thermometer off the wall and put it against the lamp. The mercury shot up right to the very top. There was no doubt about it, the lamp gave plenty of heat.

Feeling better, I hung up the thermometer and went back to

bed. The thermometer, by the way, never worked properly after that night. We found that out some time later. When it was cold in the room it would show 104 degrees above zero, and when it got a little warmer the mercury would climb all the way up to the very top and stay there until you shook it down. It never showed less than 86 degrees above so that even in winter, going by that thermometer, we wouldn't need to heat the stove. I must have spoiled it when I put it against the lamp.

The next day I told Mishka about my idea. We decided to try it out at once.

When we came home from school I got my mother to give us an old desk lamp that had been lying in the cupboard for ages, and we stood it in the box in place of the paraffin lamp. Mishka stuck a few books under it to bring the bulb closer to the water tank. Then I switched it on and we started to watch the thermometer which Mishka had brought from home.

For a long time nothing happened. The mercury stood still. We were afraid nothing would come of our experiment. But after a while the water began to get warm and the mercury started to rise. In half an hour it had climbed to 102 degrees. Mishka clapped his hands in glee and shouted: "Hurrah, that's just the temperature we need for the chicks. Electricity is as good as paraffin after all!"

"Of course it is," I said. "In fact it's much better, because you can start a fire with a paraffin lamp but electricity is quite safe."

Just then we noticed that the mercury had moved up further and was now standing at 104 degrees.

"Hey," cried Mishka. "Look at that. It's gone way up."

"We've got to stop it somehow," I said.

"Yes, but how? If it was a paraffin lamp you could turn down the wick."

"Electricity doesn't have wicks!"

"I don't think much of your electricity!" said Mishka, getting sore.

I got sore too. "My electricity? Why is it *my* electricity?"

"Well, it was your idea to use an electric lamp, wasn't it? Look, it's gone up to 108 degrees! If this goes on, all the eggs will boil and there won't be any chicks."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Let's try lowering the lamp. Then it won't heat the water up so fast and the temperature will go down."

We pulled the thickest book from under the lamp and waited to see what would happen. The mercury crawled slowly downward until it reached 102 degrees. We sighed with relief.

"Now everything is all right," said Mishka. "We can start hatching the chicks right away. I'll ask Mother for some money and you run home and ask your mother for some. Then we'll put it together and buy a dozen eggs."

I ran home and asked Mother for money to buy eggs. Mother couldn't understand what I wanted eggs for and it was some time before I got her to understand that we needed them for our incubator.

"Nothing will come of it," said Mother. "It's no easy matter to hatch chicks without a hen. You'll only be wasting your time."

But I kept insisting until she gave in.

"All right," she said at last. "But where are you going to buy the eggs?"

"In the shop, of course," I said. "Where else?"

"Oh no, that won't do," said Mother. "You need new-laid eggs, otherwise they won't hatch."

I ran back to Mishka and told him.

"What a donkey I am," said Mishka. "Of course, that's what the book says too. I forgot."

We decided to go to the village not far from town where we had stayed the summer before. Aunt Natasha, the landlady, kept hens and we were sure to get new-laid eggs there.

The Next Day

Life is funny! Yesterday we hadn't dreamt of going anywhere and here we were in the train on our way to Aunt Natasha's village. We wanted to get those eggs as soon as possible and begin hatching the chicks, but the train seemed to crawl along just for spite, and the journey took an awful long time. It's always like that, I've noticed: whenever you're in a hurry everything goes slow on purpose. Besides, Mishka and I were worried that Aunt Natasha might be out when we arrived. What would we do then?

But everything turned out all right. Aunt Natasha was home. She was very glad to see us. She thought we had come to stay with her.

"We'd love to but we can't just now," said Mishka. "Not before the holidays."

"We've come on business," I said. "We want some eggs."

"What's the matter, aren't there any eggs to be had in town?" said Aunt Natasha.

"Yes, there are," said Mishka, "but, you see, we need fresh eggs."

"And can't you get fresh eggs in the shops?"

"When the hen lays eggs they don't go straight to the shop, do they?" asked Mishka.

"Well, not right away."

"There you are, you see," cried Mishka. "The eggs are collected until there are a lot of them and it may be a whole week or two weeks, perhaps, before they get to the shops."

"Well, what of it?" said Aunt Natasha. "Eggs don't spoil in two weeks."

"Oh, don't they! Our book says you can't hatch eggs that are more than ten days old."

"Oh, hatching! That's another matter," said Aunt Natasha. "Of course you need the very freshest eggs for that, but the eggs you eat can lie for even a month or two without spoiling. You're not going to hatch chicks, are you?"

"Yes we are. That's why we're here," I said.

"But how are you going to do that?" asked Aunt Natasha. "You need a sitting-hen for that."

"No, we'll do it without a hen. We've made an incubator."

"An incubator? Gracious me! And what do you want with an incubator, I'd like to know?"

"We want to have little chicks."

"What for?"

"Oh, just for fun," said Mishka. "It's dull without chicks. You country-folk have everything—chickens, geese, cows, pigs. But we haven't got anything."

"Yes, but we live in the country. You can't very well keep cows in the city."

"Not cows, perhaps, but you could keep some sort of animals."

"Not in town. Too much trouble," said Aunt Natasha.

"There's a man in our house who keeps birds," said Mishka. "He has lots of cages with all kinds of birds—siskins, canaries, goldfinches and even starlings."

"Yes, but he keeps them in cages. You're not going to keep your chickens in cages, are you?"

"No, we'll keep them in the kitchen. We'll find a nice place

for them, don't you worry. Just let us have the best eggs you can find, the very, very freshest, otherwise they won't hatch."

"Very well, you'll have them," said Aunt Natasha. "I know the kind you need. They'll be as fresh as can be."

Aunt Natasha went to the kitchen and came back with fifteen beautiful eggs, every one of them smooth and white without a single spot. Anyone could see they were fresh. She put them in our basket and covered them with a woollen shawl so they wouldn't cool down on the way.

"Well, good-bye and good luck to you," said Aunt Natasha, as she saw us off to the gate. It was beginning to get dark outside by now, and Mishka and I hurried to the station.

It was very late by the time we got home and Mother gave me a good scolding. Mishka also got told off by his mother. But we didn't mind! What we minded most of all was that it was too late that night to begin hatching chickens and we had to put it off till next day.

The Beginning

As soon as we came home from school next day we laid out the eggs in the incubator. There was plenty of room for all of them, even a little left over.

We put the lid on the incubator, placed the thermometer in the opening and were just about to switch on the lamp when Mishka said:

"Let's first make sure that we have done everything right.

Perhaps we ought to warm up the incubator first and put the eggs in afterwards?"

"I don't know about that," I said. "Let's see what the book says."

Mishka got out the book and began reading. He read for a long time, then he said:

"You know, we very nearly suffocated them!"

"Suffocated who?"

"The eggs. It turns out they're alive."

"Alive?" I echoed in suprise.

"Yes. Here's what the book says: 'Eggs are living things, although there is no visible life in them. It is latent as yet. But when the egg is warmed, life awakens and the embryo begins to develop gradually, eventually emerging as a fledgling. Like all living beings eggs breathe...' See that? The eggs breathe just like you and me."

"Poppycock," I said. "You and me breathe through our mouths. But what do eggs breathe through?"

"We don't breathe through our mouths, we breathe through our lungs. The air gets to the lungs through the mouth, but eggs breathe through their shells. The air passes through the shell and that's how they breathe."

"Well, let them breathe all they want," I said. "We're not stopping them, are we?"

"But how can they breathe in a box? When you breathe you exhale carbon dioxide. If you were shut up in a box you'd breathe out so much carbon dioxide that you'd suffocate after a while."

"Why should I get shut up in a box? I don't want to suffocate," I said.

"Well, neither do the eggs, and we've gone and shut them up in a box."

"What are we going to do about it?"

"We need ventilation," said Mishka. "All real incubators have ventilation."

We took all the eggs out of the box, taking care not to break any, and laid them in the basket. Then Mishka brought a drill and drilled several small holes in the incubator to let the carbon dioxide out.

When that was done, we put the eggs back and covered the box with the lid.

"Just a minute," said Mishka, "we don't know yet what you're supposed to do first—heat the incubator or put the eggs in."

He consulted the book again.

"We're all wrong again," he said after a while. "It says here that the air in the incubator must be moist, because if the air is dry the liquid inside the eggs will evaporate through the shell and the embryo can die. You have to put basins of water inside the incubator. The water evaporates and makes the air moist."

So we took all the eggs out again. We tried putting two glasses of water inside, but they were too high and the lid wouldn't shut. We looked around for something smaller but we couldn't find anything. Then Mishka remembered that his little sister Maya had a set of toy bowls made of wood.

"What if we take a couple of Maya's bowls?" he said.

"A good idea!" I said. "Go and get them."

Mishka found Maya's dishes and took four small wooden bowls. They turned out to be just the right size. We filled them with water and put them inside the incubator, one in each corner. But when we tried putting the eggs back again, we found that there was only room for twelve now. Three were left over.

"It doesn't matter," said Mishka. "Twelve chicks will be 12

plenty. What do we need any more for? We'll need plenty of food for all of them as it is."

Just then Maya came in and when she saw her bowls in the incubator she set up a howl.

"Listen," I said, "we aren't taking them for keeps. In twenty-one days from now you'll get them back. If you like, we can give you three eggs for them now."

"What do I need eggs for? They're empty."

"No, they're not. They've got yolks and whites and everything else."

"But they haven't got chicks!"

"When the chicks hatch out, we'll give you one."

"Honest and truly?"

"Yes, yes. But run along now and don't bother us. We're having a hard enough time as it is, trying to figure out how to begin. We don't know whether you put the eggs in first and then heat up the incubator or heat it up first and put the eggs in afterwards."

Mishka consulted the book again and found that you could do it either way.

"All right," I said. "Switch on the electricity and let's get started."

"I'm a little .bit scared," said Mishka. "I'll tell you what. You'd better switch on the light. I'm always unlucky."

"What makes you think that?"

"I'm just unlucky, that's all. Nothing I do ever succeeds."

"Same here," I said. "I'm always having bad luck too." We both began remembering all sorts of things that had happened to us in our lives, and it turned out that we were both terribly unlucky.

"It's no use either of us starting a thing like this," said Mishka. "Nothing will come of it."

"Let's ask Maya," I said. Mishka called his sister in.

"Listen, Maya," I said. "Are you lucky?"

"Oh, yes."

"Have you ever had any failures in life?"

"Never."

"Good! Now, see that lamp in the box?"

"Yes."

"Well, go and plug in the cord."

Maya went over to the incubator and plugged in the cord.

"What else?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Mishka. "Now run along and don't bother us."

Maya went off in a huff. We quickly put the lid on and began watching the thermometer. At first the mercury stood at 64 degrees but gradually it began to rise until it reached 68 degrees. Then it went up a little faster to 77 degrees and when it got to 86 degrees it slowed down. In half an hour it rose to 95 degrees and then stopped. I put another book under the lamp and the mercury began to go up again. It climbed to 102 degrees and went on rising.

"Stop!" cried Mishka. "Look! It's up to 104. The book is too thick."

I pulled out the book and put in a thinner one. The mercury began to go down. It went down to 102 degrees and dropped still further.

"That one's too thin," said Mishka. "Wait, I'll bring an exercise book."

He ran for the exercise book and stuck it under the lamp. The mercury began to go up again, went up to 102 degrees and stopped. We kept our eyes glued to the thermometer. The mercury stood still.

"There," whispered Mishka. "We have to keep that temperature steady for twenty-one days. Think we can?"

"Of course we can," I said.

"Because if we don't, all our work will be for nothing."

"Of course we'll do it. Who said we won't!"

We sat beside our incubator all day long. We even did our lessons in the kitchen, keeping an eye on the thermometer all the time. It stood at 102 degrees.

"Everything's going fine," crowed Mishka. "If we keep it up we'll have our chicks in exactly twenty-one days. Think of it, twelve fluffy little chicks! What a jolly family they'll make!"

The Temperature Falls

I don't know about other boys but I like to sleep late on Sundays. On Sundays you don't have to go to school or rush off anywhere. Once a week a fellow can lie around in bed. There's nothing wrong in that, if you ask me. The next day happened to be Sunday but for some reason I woke up very early. The sun wasn't up yet but it was already light.

I was just about to turn over and go back to sleep when I suddenly remembered the incubator. I jumped out of bed, dressed quickly and ran over to Mishka's. Mishka opened the door himself.

"Shhhh," he hissed. "You'll wake everybody up. What's the idea of coming here so early in the morning, ringing the bell as if the house was on fire!"

He was in his night-shirt and his feet were bare.

"But you're up, aren't you?" I said.

"Up!" growled Mishka. "Haven't been to bed yet."

"Why not?"

"All because of that blinking incubator."

"Anything happened?"

"Keeps dropping."

"But why should it drop? It was standing pretty solid yesterday."

"Not the incubator, silly! I mean the temperature."

"Why should it drop?"

"That's what I'd like to know. When I went to bed everything was all right, but I couldn't fall asleep for a long time thinking about our chicks. After a while I got up just to see how the incubator was getting along. I ran into the kitchen and, what do you think—the thermometer was down to 101 degrees! I stuck another book under the lamp right away and waited until the temperature went up to 102 degrees. It's a good thing I hadn't fallen asleep or our chicks would have been done for. Instead of going back to bed I decided to wait a while and see what happened. I waited. One hour passed, two hours, and the temperature didn't change. I was tired of sitting around doing nothing, so I found a book and started to read. But I got so interested in the story that I forgot all about the thermometer. And when I looked up it was down to 101 degrees again. It had dropped another degree! I put one more exercise book under the lamp and the temperature evened up again. You see, it's steady now, you never can tell what it will do later on."

"You'd better go to bed now," I said. "I'll stay here and watch for a while."

"What's the use of going to bed now!" said Mishka. "It's broad daylight."

He tiptoed back to his room, brought his clothes and started to dress. He put on his trousers and shirt, laced up his boots, then lay down on the couch and fell asleep.

"I shan't wake him," I thought. "A fellow has to get some sleep sometime."

I sat down beside the incubator and began watching the

thermometer. After a while I got tired of doing nothing, so I got the book about poultry farming and read the bit about incubators. It said that if the eggs lie in one position the embryo is liable to get stuck to the shell on the inside, and then the chicks will turn out deformed and misshapen, or else very weak and feeble. To prevent the embryo from sticking to the shell the eggs must be turned every three hours.

I opened the incubator and started turning the eggs. Just then Mishka woke up. When he saw I had opened the incubator he jumped up, shouting: "What the dickens are you doing!"

I got such a fright I nearly dropped one of the eggs.

"Nothing," I said.

"What do you mean 'nothing'? What have you opened the incubator for? Didn't I tell you we have to wait twenty-one days. I suppose you think you can hatch chickens in one day."

"I don't think anything of the kind," I said. I tried to explain to him about having to turn the eggs round every three hours, but he wouldn't listen and kept shouting at the top of his voice:

"Put the lid on! Put it on, I tell you! A fellow can't fall asleep for a minute. As soon as I shut my eyes you had to go and open the incubator."

"I wasn't looking at them at all," I said.

He ran over and put the lid on, but by that time I had turned them all over.

Mishka had kicked up such a row that his Pa and Ma came running in.

"What's all the noise about?" they asked.

"This donkey went and opened up the incubator," said Mishka.

I explained that the eggs had to be turned over, otherwise the chicks would come out lop-sided.

"Who said so?" said Mishka. "Why don't hens hatch lop-sided chicks?"

"Hens always turn the eggs over when they're hatching chicks," said Mishka's mother.

"How does a stupid hen know that eggs have to be turned over?" said Mishka.

"They're not so stupid as you think," replied his mother. Mishka thought for a moment.

"Now I come to think of it. I've seen them turning over their eggs myself," he said at last. "I always wondered why they kept pushing at them with their noses."

Mishka's papa laughed. "Silly boy," he said. "When did you see a hen with a nose?"

"Beak, I mean. But it's the hen's nose just the same."

The Temperature Rises

Around ten o'clock the mercury in the thermometer went up one degree for some reason, so we had to pull out one of the exercise books and lower the lamp.

"I can't make it out," said Mishka, puzzled. "All night long the temperature kept dropping and now it's going up again. Queer."

We had to lower the lamp once more before dinner because the temperature went up again. After dinner, Mishka stretched out on the sofa and fell asleep again. I felt lonely sitting there by myself, so I brought my album and sketched Mishka as he slept. It's always easier to draw people when they're asleep because that's the only time they keep still.

INCUBATOR
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After a while Kostya Devyatkin came in. When he saw Mishka asleep he said: "What's wrong with him, sleeping sickness?"

"No," I said. "He's just having a nap."

Kostya went over and shook Mishka by the shoulder.

"Hey, it's time to get up!"

Mishka sprang up. "Eh, what? Is it morning already?"

"Morning!" laughed Kostya. "It'll soon be evening. Get up and come out to play. Look, the sun's shining and the birds are singing."

"We've no time for playing. We have work to do!" said Mishka.

"What work?"

"Very important work."

Mishka went over to the incubator, looked at the thermometer and let out a yell:

"What are you doing! Sitting there like a goat in the market-place? Look what's happened!"

I looked at the thermometer. It showed 103 degrees again.

Mishka quickly lowered the lamp.

"If I hadn't waked up you'd have let it go up to 104 degrees I bet!" he raged.

"It's not my fault if you snooze all the time," I said.

"Is it my fault I didn't sleep all night?"

"It isn't my fault either," I said.

Kostya noticed the incubator. "What's that? Another steam-engine?" he asked.

"Don't be silly, does it look line a steam-engine?"

"Well, what is it, then?"

"Guess!"

"Hm!" said Kostya, scratching his head. "Must be a steam-turbine."

"Wrong. Try again."

"All right, then. Some sort of jet engine."
Mishka and I burst out laughing.
"You can guess for a hundred years and you'd never guess!"
"Well, what is it?"
"An incubator."
"Ah, an incubator. I see. What's it for?"
"Don't you know what an incubator's for?" said Mishka. "It hatches chickens."
"What does it hatch them out of?"
Mishka snorted in disdain. "Out of eggs, of course, you chump."
"Oh, eggs! Of course. It's instead of a hen. I know all about it, only I thought it was called a hencoopater. And where are the eggs?"
"Here, inside the box."
"Let's see them."
"Nothing doing. If we show everybody we'll never have any chicks. If you like, you can wait until we turn them over and then you'll see."
"And when will that be?"
Mishka and I did some quick figuring and it turned out that the eggs would have to be turned over at eight o'clock.
Kostya said he would wait, so Mishka brought in his chess-board and we sat down to play. To tell the truth, it's not much fun for three to play chess, because only two can play really and the third sits by and gives advice. And nothing good ever comes of that. If you win they say it was because you were helped, and if you lose they laugh at you and say that you can't even play when somebody prompts you. Chess is a game that should be played by only two people at a time and with no one interfering.
At last the clock struck eight. Mishka opened the incubator

and started turning the eggs round while Kostya stood by and counted.

"Ten, eleven," he counted. "Eleven eggs. So you'll have eleven chicks?"

"Eleven?" echoed Mishka in surprise. "You've made a mistake. There were twelve. Dash it all, someone's gone and stolen one. It's a rotten shame! You can't take a nap around here without eggs being stolen. What were you doing?" he pounced on me. "You were supposed to be watching!"

"So I was. I was here all the time. Let's count them again. Kostya must have made a mistake."

Mishka counted the eggs over again and got thirteen.

"Look at that," he growled. "Now there's an extra one. Who could have put it there?"

Then I counted them and there were exactly twelve.

"Some counters!" I said. "Can't even count up to twelve."

"Oh dear," wailed Mishka. "Now I'm all mixed up. I had one egg left to turn over and now I don't remember which one it was."

While he was trying to remember, Maya came running in. She went straight up to the incubator, pointed to the biggest egg and said:

"That's my chick in there."

Mishka and I got angry and pushed her away. "If you come in here bothering us again you won't get any chick at all," we told her. Maya began to cry.

"You took my bowls. I can look as much as I like."

"Oh, can you? We'll see about that," said Mishka, closing the door firmly behind her.

"What shall we do now?" I said. "Shall we have to turn all the eggs round again?"

"No, we'd better not, or else we may turn them back on the side they were lying on. Better let one of them stay as it was. Next time we'll be more careful."

"You ought to mark the eggs so you'll know which you've turned and which you haven't," Kostya proposed.

"How?" asked Mishka.

"You can put a cross on them."

"No, I'll number them." Mishka got a pencil and wrote a number on all the eggs from one to twelve.

"The next time we turn them over all the numbers will be underneath, and after that the numbers will be on top again. No chance of making any more mistakes," said Mishka, and closed the incubator.

As Kostya was leaving, Mishka said to him:

"Don't tell anybody at school about our incubator."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know... They'll laugh at us."

"Why should they laugh? An incubator is a very useful thing."

"Well, you know what the boys are like, they'll say we're like a couple of sitting-hens. And then, suppose it's a failure. We'll never hear the end of it."

"But why should it be a failure?"

"Anything can happen. It's not as easy as you think. For all we know, we may be doing it the wrong way. So you keep quiet about it."

"All right," said Kostya. "I'll keep mum."

Maya on Duty

"Well, how's everything?" I asked Mishka when I met him the next morning.

"Fine, only the temperature kept dropping again all night long."

"You mean to say you didn't go to bed last night either?"

"No, I'm smarter now, I put the alarm clock under my pillow and it woke me up every three hours."

"But why did the temperature drop? It went up during the day," I said.

"I know why," said Mishka. "It's cooler at night and so the incubator cools down faster. But in the daytime it gets warmer, that's why the temperature goes up by day and down at night."

"How are we going to manage?" I asked him. "Who's going to look after the temperature while we're at school?"

"Perhaps Maya will. Let's ask her."

Mishka called Maya in and asked her if she would agree to look after the incubator while we were at school.

"No, I won't," said Maya. "Yesterday you pushed me out of the room and now you want me to help you."

"Look here," I said. "You don't want the chicks to die, do you? Because if we don't take care of them they will, and so will your chick too. We're not asking for ourselves, it's for the chicks' sake."

She couldn't refuse when I put it to her like that. I showed her what had to be done.

"See this thermometer," I said. "The mercury has to stand exactly at 102 degrees. Will you remember?"

"I'll remember."

Just to make sure I took a red pencil and marked where the mercury should stand.

"Now see you don't get anything mixed up," I said. "As soon as the mercury goes the least little bit higher you pull one of the exercise books from under the lamp. When the lamp is lowered the mercury in the thermometer comes down too. Understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

After that I showed her how to turn the eggs and told her that as soon as the clock struck eleven she must open the incubator and turn the eggs over.

Maya caught on. I made her repeat the instructions to make sure that she got everything straight. Then Mishka and I went off to school.

"Well, how's your incubator getting along?" asked Kostya as soon as we entered the classroom.

"Shh," Mishka hissed, glancing over his shoulder to see if anyone had heard.

"I was whispering."

"'Whispering'!" growled Mishka. "You were yelling at the top of your voice."

"All right, mum's the word. But I say, do let me tell the others."

"If you do, you'd better not come and see us any more. You promised to keep it a secret and now you go..."

"All right, I'll keep quiet. Listen, I've got a wonderful idea. At natural history lesson, I'll tell Marya Petrovna about your incubator. She'll be ever so pleased."

"You dare! If you tell Marya Petrovna the whole class will hear."

"All right, I'll shut up. I'll be as silent as the grave."

Kostya covered his mouth with his hand and walked away. But you could see that he was just itching to tell someone about our incubator.

Lessons began. Mishka could hardly keep still for worrying.

"What if Maya does something wrong?"

"But what can she do?"

"She might forget to watch the temperature."

"But I gave her strict instructions."

"Suppose she gets tired of staying home and goes out to play?"

"She promised she wouldn't."

"What if she goes and takes the bowls out of the incubator?"

"She won't do that."

"The bulb might burn out. What'll we do then?"

At natural history lesson Mishka and I talked so much that Marya Petrovna separated us. Mishka sat looking like a thunder-cloud, glaring at me from the other end of the room. And to make matters worse, Kostya cupped his hand to his mouth and called out in a loud whisper:

"Hey! I'm going to tell Marya Petrovna about your incubator."

Mishka writhed on his seat and hissed back: "Traitor, sneak!"

But Kostya had already shot up his hand.

"Yes, Kostya?" asked Marya Petrovna.

Mishka shook his fist at Kostya.

"Marya Petrovna, what is an incubator?" Kostya asked innocently.

Marya Petrovna began to explain what an incubator was. She said that long, long ago people learned how to hatch chickens without brood-hens by heating the eggs to a certain temperature. Even in ancient Egypt and China, two thousand years ago, they had incubators. Archaeologists have found incubators made by the ancient Egyptians. Of course they weren't big ones and they didn't hatch very many chickens. Today there are incubators which take several thousand eggs at a time.

"Two chaps I know made an incubator themselves," said Kostya. "Do you think they'll hatch any chicks?"

"You *can* hatch chickens in a home-made incubator," answered Marya Petrovna, "but it is a great deal of trouble. Factory incubators have all sorts of devices for regulating the temperature and humidity, but home-made incubators require careful watching. If your friends are persevering and serious they will succeed. But if they are anything like our Misha and

Kolya I'm afraid nothing will come of it."

"Why?" Mishka blurted out.

"Because you are very badly behaved and inattentive even in class," said Marya Petrovna and went on with the lesson.

Just as we were leaving school that day, Vitya Smirnov grabbed hold of us and said it was our turn that day to work in the Young Naturalists' circle.

"Oh, no, we can't possibly," said Mishka all excited. "We haven't any time."

"You never have any time for anything. Why did you join the circle if you never come? This is spring, the busiest season. We have to make bird-houses."

"We'll make bird-houses later on."

"But the birds will be arriving soon."

"No, they won't."

"What do you mean? You think the birds are going to wait for you?"

"They'll wait, just a little," said Mishka.

We ran home. To our relief everything was in order. The bulb had not burned out and the temperature was just right. Maya was sitting at her post beside the incubator. We thanked her and sent her off to play.

A Calamity!

From that time on life became a daily routine of watching the thermometer and turning the eggs over every three hours and refilling the water tank and the wooden bowls, because the

water evaporated quickly. It wasn't what you would call hard work but you had to be on the look-out all the time, otherwise something was bound to happen—either the temperature would suddenly go up or you'd forget to turn the eggs. You had to keep your mind on the incubator all the time.

Mishka had the worst of it because he had to watch at night. He didn't get a decent night's sleep, and for days he went about as groggy as a fly in autumn. He often took a nap after dinner on the couch in the kitchen and I would take out my drawing-book and sketch him while he slept.

That went on for five days and five nights. On the sixth day Mishka fell asleep in school, right in the middle of a lesson. Of course Nadezhda Victorovna scolded him and the whole class made fun of him.

Mishka felt very bad about it. Everybody likes to laugh at other people but nobody likes to be laughed at himself.

The worst of it was that I had brought my drawings to school that day to show the boys. They guessed at once it was Mishka I had sketched sleeping in different poses—lying, sitting and half standing.

"You certainly are a champion sleeper," said Lyosha Kurochkin to Mishka.

"He's beat the world record!" added Senya Bobrov. "Sleeps like a dormouse, twenty-four hours a day!"

The drawings were passed from hand to hand. Everybody made funny remarks and roared with laughter.

"What did you go and bring those stupid drawings of yours here for?" Mishka pounced on me.

"How did I know they would think it so funny?" I said.

"You did it on purpose so the whole class should have a good laugh at my expense. A fine friend you are! I shan't have anything more to do with you."

"Mishka, I swear I didn't do it on purpose, honestly I didn't.

If I had known this would happen I would never have sketched you at all," I protested.

But Mishka wouldn't talk to me all that day. In the evening he said:

"You ought to take the incubator over to your place and do some night watching yourself instead of drawing silly cartoons of me."

"I don't mind," I said. "You've watched for five nights. Now it's my turn."

We carried the incubator over to my place. And now my troubles began.

Every night I put the alarm clock under my pillow and in the middle of the night it went off right in my ear. I'd get up and stagger to the kitchen, check the temperature, turn the eggs over and stagger back to bed again. Most times I couldn't fall asleep at first, but the minute I dozed off the alarm would start buzzing again until I was ready to smash the clock to pieces for not letting me sleep.

Every morning I got up feeling so groggy I could hardly get out of bed. Half asleep, I'd pull on my clothes, and before I knew it I'd find myself trying to pull my trousers on over my head or sticking my legs through my shirt sleeves. Once I even put my boots on the wrong feet. The boys noticed it and made fun of me, and I had to change during the lesson.

But the worst calamity happened on the tenth night. I don't know whether it was because I had forgotten to wind the clock or because I didn't hear it go off. Anyhow, I went to bed and didn't wake up until morning. When I opened my eyes it was broad daylight. At first I couldn't understand what had happened, and then I remembered I hadn't got up once during the night. I jumped out of bed and rushed to the incubator. The thermometer showed 99 degrees. Three whole degrees less than it should be! I quickly stuffed two exercise books under the

lamp. But in my heart I knew it was no use. The eggs must be quite cold by now. Ten days' hard work wasted! The embryos must be quite big by now and now I'd gone and ruined everything.

I was so angry with myself I punched my own head.

The mercury gradually rose until it reached 102 degrees. As I watched it, I thought sadly to myself:

"There, the temperature's normal. The eggs look exactly the same as before but inside they're all dead and there won't be any chicks."

But perhaps nothing had happened after all, perhaps the embryos hadn't had time to die. How could we find out? The only way was to go on heating the eggs and if on the twenty-first day the chicks didn't hatch out that would mean they had died. Maybe they weren't dead. But it would be eleven whole days before I knew!

"That's the end of our happy family!" I thought sorrowfully. "Instead of twelve little chicks there won't be a single one."

Just then Mishka came in. He looked at the thermometer and said brightly:

"Splendid! Just the right temperature. Everything's going fine. Now it's my turn to take night duty."

"No," I said. "I'd better carry on myself. Why should you suffer for nothing?"

"Why for nothing?"

"Suppose the chicks don't hatch out?"

"Well, even if they don't, there's no reason why you should do all the hard work. We're friends. So we each have to do our share."

I didn't know what to say. I hadn't the courage to confess, so I decided to say nothing at all. I know it was not nice of me, but I couldn't help it.

Kostya came in to see us every day, and then reported to the fellows how the hatching was coming along. Of course he didn't tell them that it was Mishka and me who had made the incubator. He pretended it was some boys from another school.

"I'd like to meet those boys," Vitya Smirnov said one day.

"What for?"

"They sound interesting. We could do with a few like that in our Young Naturalists' circle. We'd have things going fine. But with chaps like Misha and Kolya you can't get anything done. They don't want to do any work at all. They didn't help to plant trees, and now they aren't making bird-houses..."

"Those boys didn't plant trees either," said Kostya with a wink at Mishka and me.

"Well, that's different. They've got enough to do without that."

Vitya never suspected that me and Mishka were the boys Kostya had told him about. And we certainly had plenty to worry about. Because of the incubator we had neglected our lessons, and we both got 2 out of 5 in arithmetic.

Alexander Yefremovich gave me a problem to solve on the blackboard. I couldn't do it, so he gave me a 2. Then he called Mishka and gave him a 2 plus. Of course we deserved it because we hadn't learned the lesson, but it was very unpleasant to get low marks just the same.

"It isn't so bad for you," said Mishka. "You only have a 2, but I've got a 2 plus."

"Silly, 2 plus is higher than 2," I said.

"Rubbish! A plus after 2 doesn't make it 3, does it?"

"No, it will be 2 just the same."

"Then what is the plus for?"

"Dashed if I know."

"I'll tell you. The plus is so you shouldn't think they gave it for nothing. It's like saying: there's a nice little plus for you. But the 2 remains a 2. That's what hurts."

"Why does it hurt?"

"Because it shows you're a dunce. If you weren't, a plain 2 would be enough to show you that you don't know anything. But a dunce has to have a 2 plus so that he shouldn't think he's being treated unfairly. But I don't like being considered a dunce. You can get a 2 minus also," he went on. "I don't see the sense of that at all. A 2 means that you don't know anything. But how can you know less than nothing?"

"You can't," I said.

"That's what I say!" said Mishka. "A 2 minus means you not only don't know anything but you don't want to know. If you just haven't done your lessons you get a 2, but if you are a well-known loafer they give you a 2 minus to make you feel it. You can even get a 1, you know," he went on, getting into his stride.

But he didn't have a chance to say any more about that because Alexander Yefremovich separated us.

At the last break Zhenya Skvortsov said: "Stay in class after lessons. We're going to have a meeting."

"Oh, but we can't stay, we've no time," said Mishka and I.

"You've got to stay," said Zhenya, "because we're going to talk about you two."

"What have we done?"

"You'll find out at the meeting," was all Zhenya said.

"I like that!" said Mishka. "We only just got that 2 and they're already calling a meeting about it. He thinks because he's the group chairman he can call meetings about everybody. Wait till he gets a 2 himself. I'd like to see him calling a meeting about that."

"He won't get 2, he's good at lessons," I said.

"What are you sticking up for him for?"

"I'm not sticking up for him."

"Dash it, now we'll have to stay behind," Mishka fussed.

"That's all right," I said. "Maya is looking after the incubator."

We stayed for the meeting.

"Today we are going to talk about marks and conduct," began Zhenya Skvortsov. "Lately some boys have been misbehaving in class, fidgeting and chattering and interfering with the others. Misha and Kolya are the worst offenders. They have had to be separated several times for talking. That won't do. It's no good at all. And now to cap it all they both got a 2 today."

"We didn't both get anything of the kind. I got a 2 plus," said Mishka.

"It makes no difference," said Zhenya. "You've both been getting low marks in other subjects too."

"We haven't any other 2's, and I only have a 3 for Russian," said Mishka.

"He has a 3 minus," put in Vanya Lozhkin.

"You keep your nose out of this," said Mishka.

"What do you mean? This is a Pionner meeting. I have a right to say what I like."

"You have to ask for the floor first."

"All right, I want the floor. Boys, if you ask me, they are getting bad marks because for some reason they haven't been doing any home-work lately. Let them tell us what that reason is."

"That's right, tell us. Let's hear," said Zhenya.

"There isn't any reason," replied Mishka.

"I know what it is," said Lyosha Kurochkin. "They talk all the time in class and don't listen to the teacher, and they don't do their homework either. I think they ought to be separated

once and for all, so they won't jabber."

"You can't separate us," said Mishka. "We're friends. You can't go and separate friends, can you?"

"If being friends only does you harm, it's the best thing to do," said Senya Bobrov.

At that point Kostya stood up for us.

"Who ever heard of friendship doing anyone any harm?" he said.

"Theirs does, because they copy each other in everything. If one of them talks, the other talks too, if one of them doesn't want to do his lessons, the other one doesn't either. If one gets a 2, so does the other. No, they've got to be separated and that's all," said Vitya Smirnov.

"Just a minute," said Kostya. "We can always separate them. But let's first see if we can't help them. Suppose they haven't any time to do their lessons?"

"What do you mean, haven't any time?"

"Well, suppose they're busy doing something very important."

Senya Bobrov laughed. "Something very important? What could that be?"

"Suppose they are making an incubator?"

"An incubator?" Senya laughed again.

"Yes, an incubator. Think it's easy? For all you know they don't sleep nights watching over the temperature. For all you know they work at it all day long and here we are scolding them. For all you know..."

"What's all this mystery about I'd like to know," Zhenya said, getting angry. "Have they really made an incubator?"

"Yes," said Kostya.

"They went and copied those boys you told us about," said Vitya.

"No," said Kostya. "They didn't copy anybody. They're the boys I told you about."

"What?!"

"That's right."

"But—but you said they were from another school?"

"I just said that for fun."

Everyone crowded round Mishka and me.

"So you made an incubator all by yourselves?"

And Vitya Smirnov said:

"It's a shame! Real naturalists don't do things like that. Fancy making an incubator and keeping quiet about it! Don't you think we'd all be interested in a thing like that? Why should you keep it a secret?"

"We thought you'd just laugh at us," we said.

"Why should we laugh? What's funny about it? On the contrary, we could have helped you. We could take turns watching the temperature. It would be easier for you and you'd have time to do your lessons."

"Boys," said Vadik Zaitsev. "Let's all pitch in and help with that incubator."

"That's right!" they all shouted.

Vitya said he would come and see us after dinner and we'd work out a schedule and arrange for everyone to take turns.

At that the meeting closed.

Volunteer Helpers

After dinner nearly the whole Young Naturalists' circle gathered in our kitchen. We showed them our incubator and told them how the heating apparatus worked, how we checked the temperature and turned the eggs over at regular intervals. Then

we sat down to work out the schedule. But first, at Vitya Smirnov's suggestion, we drew up a list of rules for those on duty.

Every day after school two boys were to come to us and Mishka and I would tell them what to do and leave them in charge of the incubator for the rest of the day. They themselves would take time off by turns to go home for dinner and do their lessons. It was part of their job to see that Mishka and I didn't hang around the incubator instead of doing our lessons.

After that, Vitya drew up the schedule so each one would know what day he would be on duty. We hung it up on the wall.

"Why aren't our names on it?" Mishka asked. "Are we going to be left out?"

"What about the night-time?" replied Vitya. "You will have to take turns doing night duty."

After that Zhenya sent all the boys away.

"Everyone can go except the two on duty today," he said. "There's no use having everyone hanging around."

The others went away, leaving Zhenya, Vitya, Mishka and me.

"You go along too," said Zhenya when we were alone.

"Where shall we go?"

"Go and do your lessons."

"But suppose something goes wrong here."

"Nothing will go wrong. If anything happens I'll call you."

"All right. But be sure you do."

So Mishka and I had to sit down and do our lessons. We did our grammar, and geography, and one sum. There were two, but the other one was too hard, so we laid it aside and went to see what was going on in the kitchen.

"What are you doing here?" said Zhenya when we came in.

"Weren't you told to do your lessons?"

"We've done them already."

"Have you? Let's have a look at your exercise books."

"Hey, what's this?" said Mishka. "A check-up?"

"We've undertaken to see this thing through, so we're responsible for you, see?"

We brought in our exercise books.

"But you've only done one sum. There are two."

"We'll do the other one later on."

"Oh no, you'll do it right now. If you start putting it off you'll forget, and then you'll turn up at school tomorrow with nothing done."

"We've done one sum, haven't we?"

"One isn't enough," said Zhenya firmly. "You know the proverb: 'Work's done, now for some fun.'"

So we had to go back and puzzle over that problem. We worked and worked but it wouldn't come out. We spent a whole hour over it, and then we went back to the kitchen.

"It doesn't come out," said Mishka. "We did everything right, but the answer we get isn't the same as the one at the back of the book. Must be a misprint."

"That's right, go and blame the book!" said Zhenya.

"It's happened before that the answer in the book wasn't right."

"Nonsense!" said Zhenya. "Let's have a look at it."

He went with us to our room and looked over what we had done. He puzzled and puzzled over the problem, everything seemed to be right, but the answer didn't come out.

"What did I tell you!" said Mishka gleefully.

But Zhenya said there must be some mistake and he wouldn't give up until he'd found it. He checked the sum from the beginning again and at last he found the mistake.

"Here it is," he said. "What's seven times seven, eh?"

"Forty-nine, of course."

"Yes, but look what you've got? Twenty-one!"

He corrected the mistake and everything came out right.

"It's all because you're careless," he said and went back to the incubator.

We copied out the problem into our exercise books and went back to the kitchen.

"We've finished," we said.

"Good, now you had better go out for a walk. A little fresh air will do you good."

There was no use protesting, so Mishka and I went off. It was a fine sunny day. The boys in the yard were playing volleyball and we joined them. After that, we went in to Kostya Devyatkin's, and while we were there, Vadik Zaitsev dropped in and the four of us played lotto and all sorts of other games until evening. It was quite late when we got home. We went straight to the kitchen and found Vanya Lozhkin there besides Zhenya and Vitya. He said he had persuaded his mother to allow him to look after the incubator that night.

"Hey, what's this!" said Mishka. "Me and Kolya won't ever get a chance to do anything this way! Vanya takes night duty tonight, and someone else will get permission tomorrow. No, I can't agree to that."

"All right," said Vitya. "I'll put you down on the time-table and you'll take turns like everybody else."

So he put us down last on the list.

Mishka and I began figuring out when our turn would come round, and it came out on the best day of all, the twenty-first day, the day the chicks were supposed to hatch out!

Final Preparations

Now at last Mishka and I could relax. To tell the truth, we weren't sorry, because the incubator had become a bit of a burden to us. We had been tied to it day and night and we were so afraid of forgetting something that we thought of it all the time. Now everything was going along splendidly without us.

We began to do our share of work in the Young Naturalists' circle. We made two bird-houses and hung them up in our garden, and planted flowers and trees in our school garden. But the most important thing was that now we had plenty of time to do our lessons. And when my mother and Mishka's saw that we were getting better marks they were glad the boys were helping us look after the incubator.

When the Young Naturalists' circle met, Marya Petrovna told us how to prepare for the arrival of the chicks. She advised us to plant some grass so they should have fresh greens to eat. She said that the best thing to plant was oats because they are very nourishing and grow fast.

Now where were we to get the oats to plant?

"We'll have to go to the bird market," said Vanya Lozhkin. "They sell all sorts of bird food there."

After school Vanya and Zhenya went off to the bird market. Two hours later they came back with their pockets full of oats and quite a tale to tell.

"There weren't any oats at the bird market. We went all over the place and saw all sorts of things—hemp, millet, burdock seed, everything except oats. We thought we'd have to come back without any, but we decided to go and have a look at the rabbits before leaving. While we were looking at the rabbits we saw a horse eating oats out of a nose-bag. So we asked for some."

"Whom did you ask, the horse?" Mishka said surprised.

"Don't be silly! We asked his owner, of course, the collective farmer who had brought the rabbits to the market. He was a nice man. He asked us what we wanted oats for and when we told him we wanted them for chicks he said: 'Oh, but you don't feed oats to chicks.' But we told him we wanted to plant some for the sprouts and he said we could take as much as we wanted. So we filled up our pockets."

We got busy at once and made two shallow boxes. We filled them with earth, poured on water and mixed it up into a thin mud. Then we threw the oats into the earth, mixed it up again well and put the boxes under the stove so the seeds would be warm.

Marya Petrovna had told us that the seeds of plants, like birds' eggs, are living things. Life slumbers inside the seed until it gets into the warm moist earth which wakes it up and it begins

to grow. Like all living things, seeds can die and dead seeds won't grow.

We were very much afraid that our seeds might be "dead" ones and kept looking into the boxes to see if they had come up. Two days passed and there was no sign. On the third day we noticed that the soil in the boxes had cracked here and there and seemed a little swollen in spots.

"What's this?" asked Mishka indignantly. "Someone's been tampering with the boxes!"

"Nothing of the kind," said Lyosha Kurochkin who was on duty that day with Senya Bobrov.

"Then why is the earth all broken up like that?" shouted Mishka. "You must have been poking it with your fingers to have a look at the seeds."

"We didn't poke anything!" Senya protested.

I lifted a lump of soil and felt for the grain underneath. It had swelled up and split open and there was a little white shoot on top. Mishka also pulled out a seed with a white shoot and examined it for a long time.

"I know what happened!" he cried. "They poked the soil up themselves!"

"Who did?"

"The seeds. They woke up and now they're pushing their way through the soil. Look at the way the soil has swelled! They've no more room down there under the soil."

Mishka ran off to call the boys to show them how the seeds were growing. Lyosha and Senya and I pulled another few seeds out of the soil. They had all begun to sprout. Soon the boys came and crowded round. Everyone wanted to have a look at the seeds.

"Look," said Vitya Smirnov, "the seeds are bursting open and the oats are hatching out of them just like chicks."

"Of course," said Mishka. "Oats are also living things, only they grow up and stand in one place, but when our chicks hatch

out they'll run around and squeak and ask for food. You'll see what a jolly little family we'll have!"

The Hardest Day of All

Working all together was fun and the time passed quickly. At last the twenty-first day arrived. It was a Friday. We had everything ready for the brood. We found a large pot in the shed and lined it with felt to make a warming-pan for the new-born chicks. Now it stood ready on top of a pan of hot water, waiting for the first chick to hatch.

Mishka and I had wanted to stay up the night before, but Vadik Zaitsev had got his mother to allow him to take night duty, and he wouldn't hear of us being there.

"I don't need you hanging around when I'm on duty," he said. "You better go to bed."

"But what if the chickens begin hatching during the night?" we said.

"What about it? As soon as a chick comes out I'll drop it into the pot and let it dry off."

"Don't you dare drop it!" I said, horrified. "You must be very gentle with chicks."

"Don't worry, I'll be gentle. Now you toddle off to bed like good boys. You're on duty tomorrow, don't forget. So you'd better have a good night's rest."

"All right," agreed Mishka. "Only please be sure to wake us if the chicks begin hatching. We've waited so long for this."

Vadik promised.

We went off to bed, but I couldn't sleep for a long time

worrying about the chickens. Next morning I woke up very early and ran to Mishka's right away. He was up already too, and was sitting beside the incubator examining the eggs.

"I don't see any sign yet."

"Too early yet, most likely," said Vadik.

Vadik soon went home because the night was over and our watch was on. When he had gone, Mishka decided to examine all the eggs once more. We began turning them over and looking for some tiny little hole which the chick inside would make with its beak. But there wasn't so much as a crack in any of the shells. We closed the incubator and sat quiet for a long time without speaking.

"Suppose we break open one and see if there's a chick inside or not?" I suggested.

"No, you mustn't. Not yet," said Mishka. "The chick is still breathing through its skin and not with its lungs. As soon as it begins breathing with its lungs it will crack open the shell by itself. If we crack it too soon the chick will die."

"But they must be alive inside there," I said. "Perhaps you can hear them move if you listen carefully?"

Mishka took an egg out of the incubator and put it to his ear, I bent over him and put my ear to it too.

"Be quiet!" growled Mishka. "How can I hear anything with you snoring into my ear!"

I held my breath. It was very quiet, so quiet you could hear the watch ticking on the table. Suddenly the bell rang. Mishka jumped and nearly dropped the egg. I ran to open the door. It was Vitya. He wanted to know whether the chicks had begun to hatch out yet.

"No," said Mishka. "It's too early."

"All right, I'll drop in again before school," said Vitya.

He went away and Mishka took the egg out again and put it to

his ear. He sat like that for a long time with his eyes closed, listening intently.

"I can't hear a sound," he said at last.

I took the egg and listened too. But there was no sound.

"Perhaps the embryo is dead?" I said. "We ought to try the others."

We took the eggs out one after the other and listened to them all, but not one of them gave any sign of life.

"They couldn't all be dead, could they?" said Mishka. "One of them at least must be alive."

The bell rang again. This time it was Senya Bobrov.

"What are you doing up so early?" I asked him.

"I came to find out how the chicks are coming along."

"They aren't coming along at all," Mishka answered. "It isn't time yet."

Seryozha arrived next.

"Well, any chicks yet?"

"You are too impatient," said Mishka. "You expect the chicks to start hatching from early morning. There's plenty of time."

Seryozha and Senya sat for a while and then left. Mishka and I began listening to the eggs again.

"No, it's no use," he said miserably. "I don't hear a thing."

"Perhaps they're keeping still just to fool us?" I suggested.

"Why would they do that? They ought to be cracking the shell by now."

Then Yura Filippov and Stasik Levshin came, and after them, Vanya Lozhkin. They kept coming, one after the other, and by the time we were due to leave for school, it began to look like a general meeting. We called Maya and told her what to do if the chicks began hatching without us, and left with the others for school.

I don't know how we lived through that day. It was the hardest day in our lives. It seemed to us that someone was deliberately stretching out the time and making every lesson ten times longer than usual. We were all terribly afraid that the chickens would begin to hatch out while we were at school and that Maya would not manage by herself. The last lesson was the worst. We thought it would never end. It was so long that we began to wonder whether we hadn't missed the bell. Then we thought that perhaps the bell was out of order. Or that Aunt Dunya, the janitress, had forgotten to ring the last bell and had gone home and we'd have to sit at school until tomorrow morning.

The whole class was fidgety and nervous. Everybody sent little notes to Zhenya Skvortsov asking what time it was, but as luck would have it Zhenya had left his watch at home that day. It was so noisy in class that Alexander Yefremovich had to stop several times to ask for silence. But the noise continued. Finally Mishka raised his hand to say that the lesson must be over, but just at that moment the bell went and everyone sprang up and rushed to the door. Alexander Yefremovich made us all sit down again and said no one must leave his desk until the teacher had left the room. Then he turned to Mishka:

"You wanted to ask me something?"

"No, I just wanted to say that the lesson was over."

"But you raised your hand before the bell rang?"

"I thought the bell was out of order."

Alexander Yefremovich shook his head, picked up the register and went out of the room. The boys dashed into the corridor and down the stairs. There was a jam at the exit, but me and Mishka managed to push our way through. We rushed headlong down the street, with the others tearing after us.

Five minutes later we were home. Maya was sitting at her post by the incubator sewing a new dress for her doll Zinaida.

"Anything happened?" we asked.

"Nothing."

"How long is it since you looked into the incubator?"

"Quite a long time ago. When I turned over the eggs."

Mishka went over to the incubator. All the boys crowded around, craning their necks and standing on tiptoe. Vanya Lozhkin climbed on to a chair to see better, fell off and nearly knocked Lyosha Kurochkin down. But Mishka couldn't bring himself to open the lid. He was afraid to look.

"Come on, open it up! What are you waiting for?" someone said.

At last Mishka lifted up the lid. The eggs lay at the bottom as before, looking like big white pebbles.

Mishka stood for a while without saying anything, then he turned them over carefully one by one and examined them from all sides.

"Not a single crack!" he announced mournfully.

Who Is to Blame?

The boys stood around in silence.

"Maybe they won't hatch out at all," said Senya Bobrov. "What do you think, eh?"

Mishka shrugged his shoulders:

"How can I tell? I'm not a sitting-hen! What do I know about hatching?"

Everyone began talking at once. Some said the chicks wouldn't hatch out at all, some said they still might, others said they either would or they wouldn't. At last Vitya Smirnov

stopped all the argument.

"It's too soon to tell for sure," he said. "The day isn't over yet. We have to carry on as before. And now everybody clear out except those on duty."

The boys went home. Mishka and I were left alone. We took another look at the eggs to see if there wasn't at least one tiny crack somewhere, but there was nothing. Mishka closed the lid.

"All right, I don't care what happens! It's too early to start worrying anyway. We'll wait until evening and if nothing happens by then we can begin to worry."

We decided not to worry and settled down to wait patiently. But that was easier said than done. We couldn't stop worrying however hard we tried and every ten minutes we peered inside the incubator. The other boys were worried too and kept coming in to inquire. Everyone had the same question: "Well, how is it?"

After a while Mishka stopped answering and only shrugged his shoulders, but he had to do it so often that by the end of the day his shoulders were hunched right up to his ears.

As the evening wore on the boys stopped coming. Vitya was the last to drop in. He sat with us for a long time.

"Perhaps you miscalculated?" he said.

We began counting again but there was no mistake. This was the twenty-first day and it was coming to an end and there were no chicks.

"Never mind," Vitya said to console us. "We'll wait till the morning. They may hatch out during the night."

I persuaded my mother to let me stay over at Mishka's place and we decided to sit up all night and watch. We sat for a long time by the incubator in silence. We had nothing to talk about any more. We couldn't even day-dream because all our hopes were dashed. Soon the trams stopped running, and it grew very quiet. The street lamp outside the window went out. I lay down

on the sofa. Mishka dozed sitting up, but he nearly fell off the chair, so he came over and lay beside me on the sofa, and we fell asleep.

When we woke up it was daylight and everything was as before. The eggs still lay in the incubator, not so much as a crack in any of them, and not a sound inside.

All the boys were terribly disappointed.

"What could have happened?" they asked. "We followed all the instructions carefully, didn't we?"

"I don't know," said Mishka, shrugging his shoulders.

Only I knew what had happened. Of course the embryos had died that time I overslept. The temperature had gone down and they had perished from the cold—died before their lives had properly begun. I felt very guilty before the others. All their trouble would be for nothing and all because of me! But I couldn't tell them just then, I decided to own up later on when the whole incident would be forgotten and they wouldn't feel so bad about losing the chicks.

We were all very sad that day at school. All the boys looked at us with such sympathy as if we were in mourning for somebody, and when Senya Bobrov took it into his head to call us the "chickabiddies", just out of habit, the others jumped at him and said he ought to be ashamed of himself. Mishka and I felt quite uncomfortable.

"I'd rather they scolded us!" said Mishka.

"Why should they?"

"Well, look at all the work they did for us. They have every right to be sore."

After school, some of the boys dropped in, but soon they stopped coming. All except Kostya Devyatkin, who came once or twice. He was the only one who hadn't given up hope yet.

"See," Mishka said to me. "Now all the boys are angry with us. Why should they be, I'd like to know! Anyone can make a mistake."

"But you said yourself they have a right to be sore."

"So they have," replied Mishka irritably. "And so have you. It's all my fault. I know."

"Why is it your fault? Nobody is blaming you for anything. And it isn't your fault at all," I said.

"Yes, it is. But you won't be too angry with me, will you?"

"Why should I be?"

"Oh, because I'm such a good-for-nothing. It's all my bad luck, nothing I do ever comes to any good."

"That's not true. It's me who spoils everything," I said. "It's all my fault."

"No, it isn't. It's my fault. It's me who killed the chicks."

"How could you have killed them?"

"I'll tell you, only promise you won't be angry?" said Mishka. "Once I fell asleep early in the morning, and when I woke up and looked at the thermometer it had gone up to 104 degrees. I opened the lid quickly to let the eggs cool off, but I suppose it was too late."

"When was that?"

"Five days ago."

Mishka looked terribly guilty and miserable.

"Well, you needn't worry," I said to him. "The eggs were spoiled long before that."

"Before what?"

"Before you overslept."

"Who spoiled them?"

"I did."

"You? How?"

"I also overslept, and the temperature went down, and the eggs were spoiled."

"When did that happen?"

"On the tenth day."

"Why didn't you say anything before?"

"I was afraid to own up. I thought perhaps the chicks hadn't died after all, but now I know they did."

"And you let the boys do all that work for nothing," said Mishka looking sternly at me, "just because you were afraid to own up."

"Well, I thought that perhaps it would be all right. The boys would have decided to carry on in any case, otherwise we would never know whether the chicks had died or not."

"Oh, would they!" said Mishka indignantly. "Anyhow you ought to have owned up right away so we could all decide together instead of you deciding for everybody else."

"Look here," I said, "what are you shouting at me for? Why didn't you own up yourself? You also overslept, didn't you?"

"So I did," said Mishka, contrite. "I'm a pig for sure. You can punch my nose if you like."

"I shan't do anything of the kind. But mind you don't go and tell the boys about that," I said.

"I'll tell them tomorrow. Not about you, but about myself. Let everyone know what a pig I am. That will be a punishment for me."

"All right, then I'll own up too," I said.

"No, you'd better not."

"Why not?"

"Well, you know them. They always laugh at us because we do everything together. We go to school together, do our lessons together and even get low marks together. Now they'll say we overslept our watch together too."

"Let them say what they like," I said. "Besides, I couldn't stand by and let them laugh at you, could I?"

When All Hope Fled

That sad day drew to a close and evening came again. The situation in the kitchen remained unchanged: the incubator was warm, the lamp still burned, but our hopes were dead. Mishka sat silently staring at the egg in his hand. We couldn't make up our minds whether to crack it open or wait a while. All of a sudden Mishka started and stared at me with wide-open eyes. I thought he had seen a ghost behind me and I turned round quickly. But there was nothing there. I turned back to Mishka.

"Look!" he said hoarsely, stretching out his hand with the egg in it.

At first I couldn't see anything at all, but then I saw what looked like a small crack in one spot.

"Did you knock it against something?"

Mishka shook his head.

"Then—then—the chick did it?"

Mishka nodded.

"Why are you so sure?"

Mishka shrugged his shoulders.

I carefully lifted the bit of broken shell with my nail, making a small hole in the egg. The same moment a tiny yellow beak thrust itself through the hole and then disappeared.

We were so excited we couldn't speak and just hugged each other for joy.

"Hurrah! It's happened!" shouted Mishka and burst out laughing. "Now where shall we run to? Where shall we go first?"

"Wait a minute!" I said. "What's the rush? Where are you off to?"

"We've got to run and tell the boys!" He rushed to the door.

"Wait!" I said. "Put the egg back first. You aren't going to take it with you, I hope?"

Mishka came back and put the egg into the incubator. At that moment Kostya came.

"We've got a chick already!" shouted Mishka.

"You're fibbing!"

"Word of honour!"

"Where is it?"

Mishka lifted the incubator lid and Kostya looked inside.

"Where's the chick? All I see is eggs."

Mishka had forgotten where he had put the egg with the crack in it and now he couldn't find it. Finally he chanced on it and showed it triumphantly to Kostya.

Kostya squealed with delight. "Look, there's a real chicken's beak sticking out of it!" he cried.

"Of course it's real. Did you think it was some circus trick, or what?"

"Wait, fellows. You hang on to that egg and I'll go and call the others," said Kostya.

"That's right, go and get them. They didn't believe there would be any chicks at all. No one came in all evening."

"That's where you're mistaken. They're all at my place and they still believe in the chicks, but they were afraid to bother you, so they sent me to find out how things were coming along."

"Why were they afraid?"

"Well, they knew how badly you must be feeling about it and they didn't want to be in the way."

Kostya ran out and we heard him go clattering down the stairs, three steps at a time.

"Golly!" cried Mishka. "I haven't told Mother yet!" He ran to call his mother, and I snatched up the egg and ran off to show it to my mother.

Mother looked at it and told me to run and put it back in the

incubator at once, otherwise it might cool down and the chicken would catch cold.

I rushed back to Mishka's place and there he was in the kitchen all excited and his mother and father were standing laughing at him. As soon as he saw me Mishka pounced on me:

"Did you see where I put that egg? I've turned the whole incubator upside down and I can't find it anywhere!"

"What egg?"

"You know ... the one with the chick in it!"

"Here it is," I said.

When Mishka saw the egg in my hands he nearly had a fit.

"You silly ass! What do you mean by picking up the egg and running off with it!"

"Hush," said Mishka's mother. "All that fuss about an egg!"

"But, Mother, it isn't an ordinary egg. Look at it!"

Mishka's mother took the egg and looked at the tiny little beak showing through the hole. His dad looked at it too.

"Hm," he said smiling. "Remarkable!"

"There's nothing remarkable about it," said Mishka with an important air. "It's just a natural phenomenon."

"You're a natural phenomenon yourself," laughed Mishka's dad. "There's nothing remarkable about the chicken of course. What's remarkable is that it hatched out in your incubator. I must admit I didn't think anything would come of it."

"Why didn't you say anything then?"

"Why should I? I'd rather you spent your time breeding chickens than running wild in the street."

At that point Maya came into the kitchen. She was already in bed when she heard about a chick, that's why she dressed in a hurry and her dress was on back to front, and her shoes were on her bare feet. We allowed her to hold the egg for a minute or

two. She put her eye to the hole and just then the chick stuck out its beak.

Maya screamed. "He wanted to peck me!" she cried. "You naughty little chick, you! Not out of your shell and fighting already."

"You mustn't shout at a new-born chick like that!" said Mishka. "You'll frighten it." He took the egg and laid it back in the incubator.

At that moment there was a noise outside on the stairs and the sound of running feet. Soon the kitchen was full of boys. The egg had to be taken out again and shown around. Everybody wanted to look into the hole and see the chick.

"Fellows," cried Mishka. "Give us back the egg. We've got to put it back in the incubator, or the chicken will catch cold."

But no one paid any attention to him. We had to take the egg away by force.

"Aren't there any cracks in the other eggs yet?" Vitya asked.

We inspected the other eggs but there was no sign of any more cracks.

"No, No. 5 is the only one. The rest have no cracks," said Mishka.

"Perhaps they'll hatch out later on," said the boys.

"It doesn't matter," said Mishka. "Even if only one chick hatches out I'll be happy. At least we shan't have had all that trouble for nothing!"

"Shouldn't we break open the shell and let the chick out?" said Senya Bobrov. "He must be uncomfortable, sitting in there."

"Oh no," said Mishka. "You mustn't touch the shell. The chick's skin is still too tender and you can hurt it."

It was quite some time before the boys finally left. Everyone wanted to be there to see the chick climb out of the shell, but it

was already late and they had to go home.

"Never mind," Mishka said. "This won't be the only chick. You'll see, the others will soon begin hatching out too."

When the boys had gone Mishka examined the eggs once more and found another crack.

"Look," he shouted. "No. 11 is beginning to hatch out too!"

I looked, and sure enough there was a crack on the egg which had the number "11" written on it.

"What a pity the boys went away," I said. "Now it's too late to run for them."

"Yes, it is a pity!" murmured Mishka. "But never mind, tomorrow they'll see the chicks already hatched."

We sat down by the incubator, nearly bursting with happiness.

"You and me are certainly the lucky ones," said Mishka. "I bet very few people are as lucky as we are."

Night came. Everyone had gone to bed long ago but Mishka and I didn't feel the least bit sleepy.

The time went very fast. At about two o'clock in the morning another two eggs cracked: Nos. 8 and 10. And the next time we looked into the incubator there was a real surprise waiting for us. There among the eggs was a tiny new-born chick. It was trying to stand on its legs, but it kept toppling over.

I nearly choked with happiness.

I picked up the chick. It was still wet and instead of feathers it had silky yellow down sticking untidily all over its tender pink back.

Mishka opened up the pot and I put the chick inside and we added hot water to the pan underneath so the chick should be warm.

"It's very warm in there, he'll soon dry up and look nice and fluffy," said Mishka.

He took the two halves of the shell out of the incubator.

"It's a wonder how such a huge chick could fit into such a little shell!"

And the chick really did look huge compared with the shell. But, after all, he had been curled up inside it, with his legs tucked up under him and his head twisted round, and now he had straightened out and was standing on his spindly little legs with his neck stretched out.

Mishka was looking at the broken shell when suddenly he cried out:

"Look, this is the wrong chick!"

"What do you mean, the wrong chick?"

"It's not the first one! The first one that cracked the shell was No. 5, this is No. 11."

Sure enough the shell had the figure 11 written on it.

We looked into the incubator. No. 5 was still lying where we had laid it.

"What's the matter with it?" I said. "It was the first to crack the shell and now it won't come out!"

"It's probably too weak to break the shell itself," said Mishka. "Let it lie a little while, perhaps it'll get stronger."

Our Mistake

We were so busy that we did not notice that morning had come until we saw the sun shining in the window. Jolly sunbeams played on the kitchen floor, making the room look bright and gay.

"You'll see, the boys will be coming in soon," said Mishka. "They won't be able to hold out."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when two of them arrived—Zhenya and Kostya.

"Want to see a miracle?" cried Mishka and he picked the new-born chicken out of the warming-pan. "There! A miracle of nature."

The boys examined the chick solemnly.

"And three more eggs have cracked," Mishka boasted. "Look, Nos. 5, 8 and 10."

The chick evidently didn't like the cold. When we held him in our hands he began to fidget, but as soon as we put him back into the pan he quieted down.

"Have you fed him?" asked Kostya.

"Oh no," said Mishka. "It's too soon to feed him. You only feed them the day after they're hatched."

"I bet you haven't slept all night," Zhenya said.

"No... We've been far too busy."

"Then you'd better go and take a nap and we'll take over for a while," suggested Kostya.

"All right. But promise you'll wake us if another chick appears."

"Of course."

Mishka and I lay down on the couch and went to sleep at once. To tell the truth I had felt sleepy for a long time. The boys woke us up at about ten o'clock.

"Come and look at miracle No. 2!" cried Kostya.

"Miracle number what?" I muttered, still half asleep. I looked round and saw that the kitchen was full of boys.

"Here it is!" they cried and pointed to the warming-pan.

Mishka and I jumped up and ran to look into the pan. There were two chicks there now. One of them was fluffy and round and as yellow as egg powder. A real beauty!

"Isn't he splendid!" I said. "Why is the first one so mangy looking?"

The boys laughed. "That one is the first one!"

"Which one?"

"The fluffy one."

"No, it isn't. It's that skinny one."

"The skinny one has just hatched out. The first one has dried up and that's why he's fluffy."

"Isn't that great!" I said. "Then the second one will be fluffy too when he dries?"

"Of course."

"What number is that?" Mishka asked.

The boys looked puzzled.

"I thought you knew all the eggs are numbered," said Mishka.

"No, we didn't look for any number," said Kostya.

"We can see by the shell," I said. "The shell must still be inside."

Mishka looked into the incubator and let out a yell:

"Look! There's another two brand-new chicks in there!"

Everybody made a dash for the incubator. Mishka carefully took out two new chicks and showed them to us.

"There they are, the eagles!" said Mishka proudly.

We put them into the warming-pan with the other two. Now we had four chicks. They sat huddled together for warmth.

Mishka took the broken shells out of the incubator and looked for the numbers.

"Nos. 4, 8 and 10," he said. "But which is which?"

Of course you couldn't tell now what shell they had hatched from. The boys laughed.

"The numbers are all mixed up!"

"No. 5 is still lying there in the incubator," I said.

"So it is," cried Mishka. "What's the matter with it? Maybe it's dead?"

We got out No. 5 and widened the hole a little. The chick was lying quietly inside. It moved its head.

"Hurrah, it's alive!" we shouted and laid it back inside the incubator.

Mishka checked over the remaining eggs and found another crack, in No. 3. The boys clapped their hands.

Things were really humming at last!

After a while Maya came in. We showed her the chicks.

"That one is mine!" she said, trying to snatch at the fluffy one.

"Just a minute," I said. "Don't snatch. He has to sit there in the warming-pan for a while, otherwise he'll catch cold."

"All right, I'll take him later on. But the fluffy one will be mine. I don't want the skinny one."

It was Sunday. Since there was no school that day the boys spent the whole day in our kitchen. Mishka and I sat in the place of honour, beside the incubator. To the right, near the stove, stood the warming-pan with the new-born chicks inside, on the stove was the pot of hot water, and on the window-sill were the boxes with the oats which were already a bright green. The boys laughed, cracked jokes and told all sorts of interesting stories.

"Have you figured out why they didn't hatch out when they were supposed to?" one of the boys asked. "You expected them on Friday."

"I can't think what happened," replied Mishka. "The book says that they are supposed to hatch out on the twenty-first day and this is the twenty-third. Maybe the people who wrote the book made a mistake."

"If anyone made a mistake, it's you," said Lyosha Kurochkin. "When did you put the eggs in the incubator?"

"On the third. It was on a Saturday. I remember perfectly because the next day was Sunday."

"Listen here," said Zhenya Skvortsov. "There's something wrong: you put the eggs in on Saturday and the twenty-first day comes out on Friday."

"He's right," said Vitya Smirnov. "If you started on Saturday, the twenty-first day ought to be on Saturday. There are seven days in a week and twenty-one days makes exactly three weeks."

"Three times seven is twenty-one!" laughed Senya Bobrov. "At least that's what the multiplication table says."

"I don't know about the multiplication table but that's how we figured it," said Mishka huffily.

"How did you count?"

"I'll tell you," said Mishka, counting on his fingers. "The 3rd was the first day, the 4th was the second, the 5th, the third..."

He counted all the way up to Friday and got twenty-one days.

Senya looked puzzled. "That's funny. According to the multiplication table the twenty-first day comes on Saturday, and when you count on your fingers it comes out on Friday."

"Show us again how you counted," said Zhenya.

"Look," said Mishka, bending his fingers again, "Saturday, the 3rd, was the first day, Sunday, the 4th, was the second day..."

"Just a minute! You're wrong! If you began on the 3rd, you shouldn't count that day."

"Why?"

"Because the day wasn't over. It didn't pass until the 4th. That means you ought to count from the 4th."

Suddenly Mishka and I both saw it in a flash. Mishka tried counting the new way and it came out right.

"Of course," he said. "The twenty-first day was yesterday."

"Then everything came out as it should have," I said. "We put the eggs in the incubator on Saturday evening, and the first crack appeared on Saturday evening. Exactly twenty-one days later."

"You see how much trouble you can avoid by knowing how to count properly," said Vanya Lozhkin.

Everyone laughed.

"Yes," said Mishka, "if we hadn't made that blunder we could have saved ourselves a lot of worry and bother."

Birthday

By the end of that day there were already ten chickens sitting in our warming-pan. The last to appear was No. 5. He didn't want to come out of his shell for anything and we had to break off the top to help him out. If we hadn't done that he would still have been sitting there. He was smaller than the other birds and weaker, probably because he had been in the shell so long.

Towards evening only two eggs were left in the incubator. They looked very sad lying there all by themselves and there was still no sign of a crack on them. We kept the lamp on in the incubator but they didn't hatch out that night either. All the new-born chicks spent the night very comfortably in the warming-pan, and in the morning we let them down on the floor—ten yellow balls of fluff cheeping for all they were worth. They blinked their little eyes and turned away from the bright light. Some stood quite firmly on their little legs, others were still wobbly. Some even tried to run but they weren't very good at it. Sometimes they pecked with their little beaks at small spots on the floor and even at the shiny heads of nails on the floor-boards.

"Look at that, they're hungry!" cried Mishka.

We quickly boiled an egg, chopped it up fine and spread it on the floor, but the chicks didn't know what to do with it. We tried to feed them out of our hands.

"Eat, you silly things," we said. But the chicks didn't even look at the food. Just then Mishka's mother came into the kitchen.

"They won't eat any egg, Mum," Mishka said.

"You must teach them."

"How? We told them to eat but they won't listen to us."

"That's not the way to teach chicks. You have to tap on the floor with your finger."

Mishka sat down beside the chicks and tapped on the floor next to the egg crumbs. The chicks watched the finger pecking at the food and they began imitating it. In a few minutes they had eaten up all the egg. Then we put down a saucer of water and they drank it up. You didn't have to teach them that. Then they got into a huddle and we put them back in the pan to warm up.

When Marya Petrovna came to class that day we all ran to meet her with the news that our chicks had hatched out. She was very pleased.

"So this is your chicks' birthday," she said. "I congratulate you."

We all laughed, and Vitya Smirnov said:

"We must have a birthday party for them. Let's have it today."

Everyone approved of the idea.

"Yes, let's, let's. Marya Petrovna, will you come to our chicks' birthday party?"

"Thank you, I'll come with pleasure," Marya Petrovna said, smiling. "I'll bring them a present too."

"We must all bring them presents!" the boys cried. When we

came home from school Mishka and I waited impatiently for the guests to arrive. We were dying to see what sort of presents our chicks would get.

Senya Bobrov came first with a bouquet of flowers.

"What's that for?" said Mishka.

"For the chickens. That's my present."

"Whoever heard of flowers for chicks. They can't eat flowers, can they?"

"They don't have to eat them. They'll look at them and smell them."

"What in idea! As if they haven't seen flowers before."

"Of course, they haven't. Get me a jar to put them in. You'll see how nice they'll look."

We got a jar and put the flowers in water. The next to arrive were Seryozha and Vadik. They both brought bunches of snowdrops.

"What is everybody bringing flowers for?" said Mishka scowling.

"Don't you like our presents?" said Vadik, offended. "It isn't nice to look gift horses in the mouth."

We put their flowers in water too.

Then Vanya Lozhkin came and brought half a kilo of oatmeal. Mishka looked doubtful: "I'm afraid they won't eat it."

"You can try," said Vanya.

"No, we'd better wait and ask Marya Petrovna."

Just then Marya Petrovna came. She carried something wrapped in newspaper. It turned out to be a bottle filled with what looked like milk.

"Milk!" shouted Mishka. "We never thought of giving them milk."

"This is buttermilk," said Marya Petrovna. "It is just what they need for the first few days. You'll see how they like it."

We let the chicks out of the pot and poured the buttermilk into a saucer and gave it to them. They drank it up with gusto.

"That's what I call a real present for chicks," said Mishka delighted. "You have to know what to bring to a chickens' birthday party."

The guests kept coming one after another. Vitya and Zhenya brought millet. Then Lyosha Kurochkin came running with a baby's rattle.

"I couldn't think what to bring, and I saw these rattles in a shop on the way here, so I bought them one."

"A brilliant idea, I must say," said Mishka sarcastically. "The perfect birthday gift for a chicken."

"How was I to know what to buy? Besides, they might like the rattle for all you know."

He ran over to the chickens and shook the rattle over their heads. They stopped pecking at the buttermilk and lifted their heads to listen.

"See that!" cried Lyosha overjoyed. "They like it!"

Everyone laughed. "All right," Mishka said. "Now let them eat in peace."

I asked Marya Petrovna whether we could feed them oatmeal. She said they ate any sort of meal provided it was cooked.

"How do you cook it?" Mishka wanted to know.

"Just the way you cook porridge," said Marya Petrovna.

Mishka and I wanted to cook the porridge at once but just then another guest arrived—Kostya Devyatkin.

"Have you brought a present?" the boys demanded.

"Of course I have," said Kostya, pulling two pies out of his pocket.

"What a funny present," laughed the boys.

"You always have pies at birthday parties, don't you?" said Kostya.

"What's inside them?" Mishka asked suspiciously.

"Rice."

"Rice?" cried Mishka.

He snatched the pies out of Kostya's hand and began scooping the rice out of them.

"Hey! What're you doing!" said Kostya. "Don't you believe me?"

But Mishka didn't answer. He scooped the rice out on to a saucer and put it in front of the chicks. They began pecking at it right away.

When Maya saw that everyone had brought gifts for the chicks she went to her room and brought a piece of red ribbon, cut it into little strips and tied a red bow round each chick's neck. We put the jars of flowers down on the floor near the chicks, and what with the flowers, the ribbons, and the saucers of buttermilk, rice and fresh water, it really did begin to look like a birthday party. Kostya wanted to feed them grass, but Marya Petrovna said they were too young for greens, and we had better wait till tomorrow.

After the chicks had had enough to eat and drink we took off their ribbons and put them back into the warming-pan. Marya Petrovna advised us to fence off a part of the kitchen for them and keep a pot of hot water there so they can warm themselves against it.

"The best thing would be to take them to the country. Here indoors they may get sick and die. They need fresh air," said Marya Petrovna.

We showed her our incubator and the two eggs still lying inside.

"I'm afraid those won't hatch out any more," said Marya Petrovna. "But it doesn't matter. You have done very well as it is."

"That's because all the boys pitched in and helped us," said Mishka. "We couldn't have managed by ourselves."

"I was afraid nothing would come of it because I overslept once and the temperature went down," I said.

"They can cool down quite a bit without being spoiled," said Marya Petrovna. "After all, the hen doesn't sit on her eggs all the time. Once a day she goes off to get something to eat, leaving the eggs uncovered. Incubator eggs are also cooled off once a day so as to create the natural conditions for the embryo to develop. It is much worse to overheat them."

"I overheated them once," said Mishka. "The temperature went up to 104 degrees."

"Most likely you noticed it before any serious harm was done," said Marya Petrovna. "But if you had let the temperature remain high for a long time the eggs would surely have been spoiled."

That evening we broke open the two remaining eggs. In both of them we found undeveloped embryos. Life had stopped and the chicks had died before they were born. Perhaps that was the result of overheating.

We switched off the lamp: it had burned for exactly twenty-three days. The mercury in the thermometer gradually went down. The incubator cooled off. But in the pan near the stove was our happy family—ten fluffy little chicks.

To the Country

Our little family lived very happily all together. The chicks felt quite all right so long as they were close together. But if any one of them strayed away from the others he would

start cheeping nervously and running about looking for his brothers, and he wouldn't calm down until he had found them.

Maya had wanted to take her chick away from the very beginning, but we wouldn't let her. Then one day she said she wouldn't wait any more and she picked one of the chicks up and took it to her room. Half an hour later she came back all in tears:

"I can't bear it! It breaks my heart to hear him cry. I thought he'd get used to it after a little while, but he keeps crying so pitifully I can't stand it!"

As soon as she put the chick on the floor he made straight for the other chicks huddled together in the corner.

We fenced off a corner of the kitchen for them, spread a piece of oilcloth on the floor and put an iron pot of hot water on it. We covered the pot with a pillow to keep the water from cooling down too quickly. The chicks nestled under the pillow around the warm pot and felt as comfy as if they were nestling under the mother-hen's wings. The pot with hot water took the place of the brood-hen.

Sometimes we took them out into the yard, but it was dangerous for them there: too many stray dogs and cats prowling about. So they spent most of the time indoors, and we were very much afraid that they were not getting enough fresh air.

One chick worried us particularly. He was smaller than the others and less lively. He was a thoughtful sort of chick. He often sat quietly by himself instead of running around with the others and he ate very little. That was No. 5, the one that had hatched out last.

"We really ought to pack them up and take them to the country," said Mishka. "I'm afraid they might get sick."

But we could not bear the thought of parting with them and

so we kept putting it off from day to day.

One morning Mishka and I came to feed the chicks as usual. By now they had learned to know us and they came running from under the warm pot to meet us. We had brought them a plate of millet gruel, and they set to it with gusto, pushing one another out of the way and jumping over one another's head, each one trying to get ahead of the others. One of them even got on the plate with his feet.

"Where's No. 5?" said Mishka.

No. 5 usually hung behind the others. Since he was the weakest he got pushed aside, and we usually had to feed him separately. Sometimes he didn't eat anything, but he always came running with the others because he didn't want to be left alone. But this time there was no sign of him. We counted the chicks and found that one was missing.

"Perhaps he's hiding behind the pot?" I said. I looked behind the pot and there he was lying on the floor. I thought he was just taking a rest. I stretched out my hand and picked him up. His little body was quite cold and his head hung down lifelessly on his skinny little neck. No. 5 was dead.

We stared at him for a long time, feeling so sad we could not speak.

"It's our fault!" Mishka said at last. "We ought to have taken him to the country. He would have got nice and strong there in the fresh air."

We buried him in the back yard under a lime-tree, and the very next day we packed the others in a basket and set out for the country. All the boys came to see us off.

Maya wept bitterly when she kissed her own chick good-bye. She wanted terribly to keep him, but she was afraid he would be lonesome for his little brothers, and so she agreed to let us take him to the country.

We covered the basket with a shawl and went off to the station. The chicks were warm and comfortable in the basket.

They sat quietly all the way, cheeping softly to one another now and again. The passengers looked at us curiously when they heard the chicks cheeping and guessed what we had in the basket.

"Well, my young poultry farmers, you've come for more eggs, I suppose?" laughed Aunt Natasha when she saw us.

"No," said Mishka. "We've brought you some chicks instead."

Aunt Natasha peeped into the basket.

"Heavens alive!" she cried. "Where on earth did you get all those chicks?"

"We hatched them in our own incubator."

"You're joking. You must have bought them in some bird shop."

"No, Aunt Natasha. Remember those eggs you gave us a month ago? Well, we've brought them back to you, but now they're chicks."

"Well I never!" cried Aunt Natasha. "You'll want to be poultry farmers or something like that when you grow up, I suppose."

"We don't know yet," said Mishka.

"But aren't you sorry to part with the chicks?"

"We are, terribly," replied Mishka. "But you see, it isn't good for them to live in town. Here the air is pure and fresh and they have more room to run about. They'll grow up into fine strong birds. The hens will lay eggs for you and the cocks will crow. One of the chicks died and we buried him under the lime-tree."

"You poor dears," said Aunt Natasha, putting her arms round Mishka and me. "But never mind. It can't be helped. All the others are fine and strong."

We let the chicks out of the basket and watched them romping about in the sunshine. Aunt Natasha said she heard her

hen clucking, and Mishka and I ran with her to the shed to look at it. She was sitting in a basket with hay sticking out on all sides. She looked sternly at us as if she was afraid we had come to take her eggs away.

"That's good," said Mishka. "Now our chicks will have playmates. They will have lots of fun."

We spent all day in the country. We went for a walk in the woods, down to the river and across the meadows. The last time we had been there it was early spring and the fields had been still bare. At that time the tractors had been busy in the fields turning up the soil. Now the fields were covered with green shoots which spread in a huge green carpet as far as you could see.

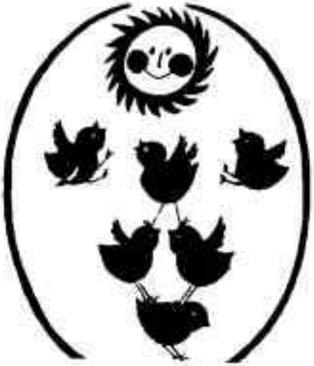
It was lovely in the woods. All sorts of beetles and other insects crawled about in the grass, butterflies fluttered about everywhere and birds sang in every tree. It was so beautiful that we didn't want to go home. We decided we would come here in the summer, pitch a tent on the river-bank and live there like Robinson Crusoe.

But finally it was time to go. We went back to Aunt Natasha's to say good-bye. She gave us each a piece of cake to eat in the train and made us promise to come to her for the summer holidays. Before leaving, we went into the back yard for a last look at the chicks. They seemed quite at home already and were running about the trees and bushes cheeping merrily. But they still kept close together and went on cheeping so that if any of them strayed away in the grass he could easily find the others.

"Good-bye, jolly family!" said Mishka. "Have a nice time in the fresh air and sunshine, get big and strong and grow up to be fine healthy birds. Always keep together. Remember you are all brothers, children of the same mother ... er ... I mean the same incubator, where you all lay side by side when you were still plain ordinary eggs and couldn't run about or talk ... er ...

cheep, I mean... and don't forget us because we made the incubator, and that means if it wasn't for us you wouldn't be here and you wouldn't know how wonderful it is to be alive!"

That's all.



VISITING GRANDPA

THE CRUCIAN CARP

THE PATCH

SASHA

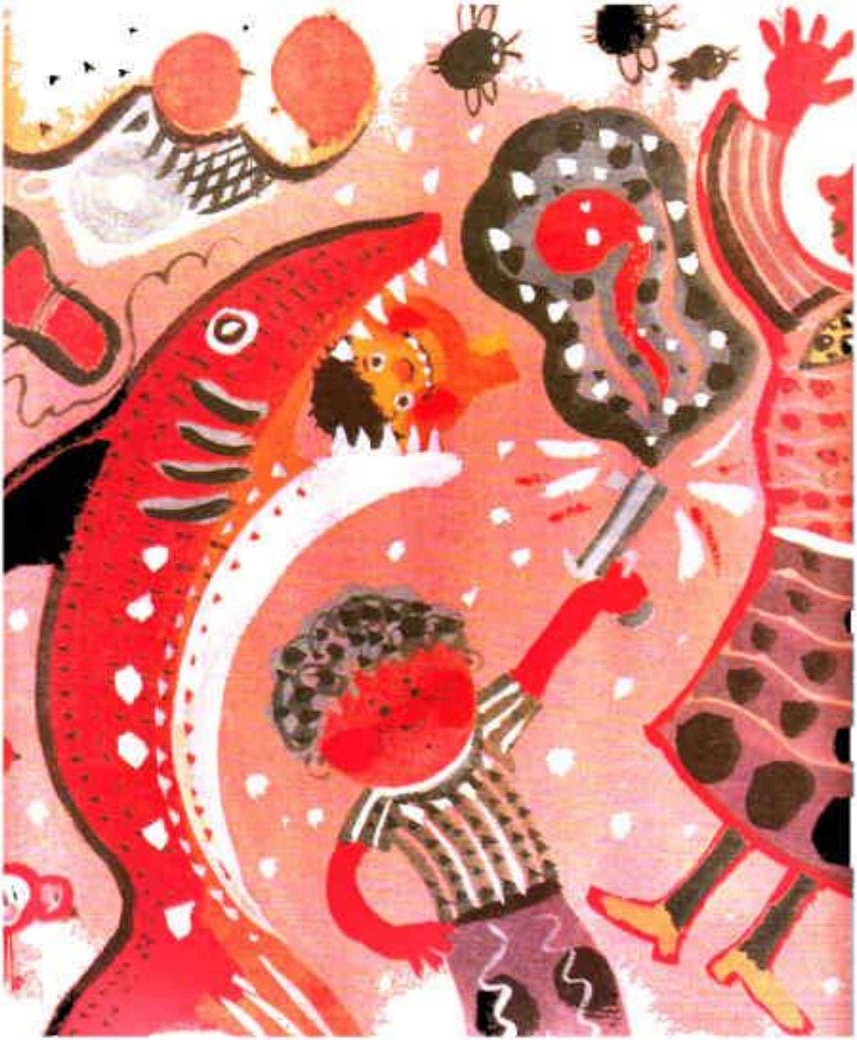
BOBBIE VISITS BARBOSS

STORY-TELLERS

AND I'M HELPING TOO

PUTTY

MISHKA'S PORRIDGE

THE TELEPHONE

JOLLY FAMILY